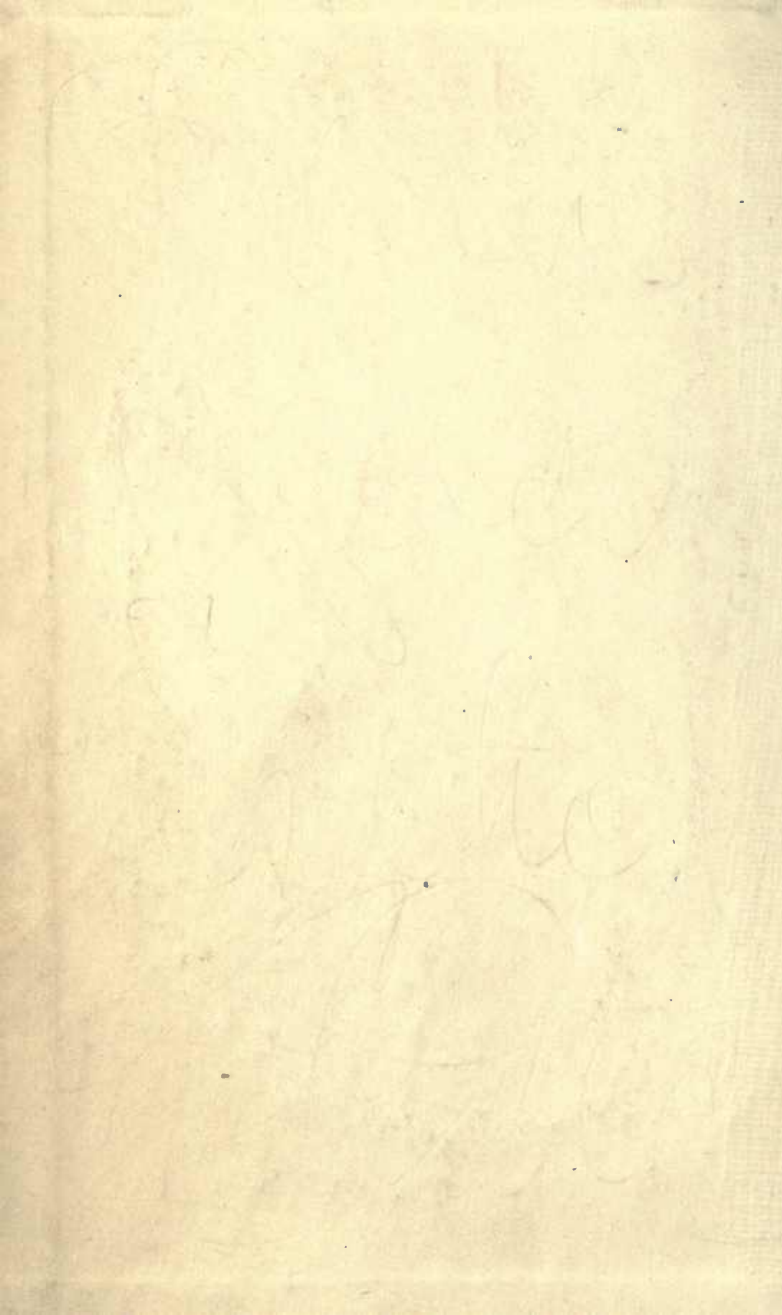




# THE KING'S AGENT

*by*

ARTHUR PATERSON



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THE KING'S AGENT





*The*  
**KING'S AGENT**

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BY ARTHUR PATERSON

AUTHOR OF CROMWELL'S OWN, THE GOSPEL WRIT IN STEEL,  
FOR FREEDOM'S SAKE, A SON OF THE PLAINS, ETC., ETC.



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# KING'S AGENT

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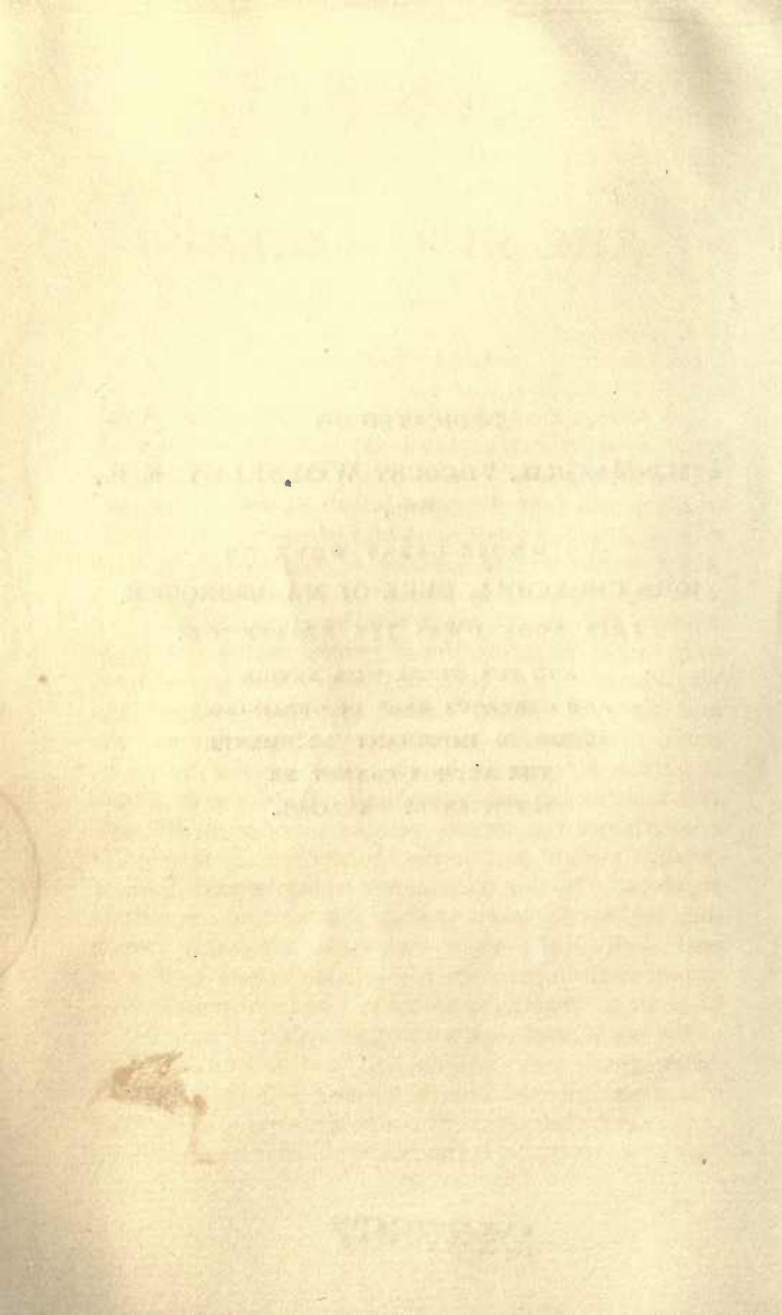
1902

DEDICATED TO  
FIELD-MARSHAL, VISCOUNT WOLSELEY, K. P.,  
ETC.,

TO WHOSE GREAT WORK ON  
JOHN CHURCHILL, DUKE OF MARLBOROUGH,  
THIS BOOK OWES ITS EXISTENCE;

AND FOR WHOSE WISE ADVICE  
AND GENEROUS HELP IN OBTAINING  
ACCESS TO IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS  
THE AUTHOR CANNOT BE  
SUFFICIENTLY GRATEFUL.

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# THE KING'S AGENT

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## CHAPTER I

A SHARP, frosty evening in January, 1692. A full moon shone from a cloudless sky and silvered the roofs of the high gabled houses in the fashionable quarters of town, and even straggled fitfully down into the narrow, ill-paved, uninviting streets below. It was a night when, in the city of London of those days, no man who had anything to lose embarked upon a journey without providing himself with an armed escort. Not only were the professional gentlemen of the highway numerous and bold, but deserters from the army and navy, "pressed" men who had escaped but dared not return to their native villages, infested the large towns, begging by day, and robbing by night. Not a street but was patrolled by these lost dogs, not a beer-house but served them as a house of call, and on such a night as this they turned out in formidable numbers. On this particular evening certain of these men had hardly taken up their regular beats in a street near Pall Mall, when they saw something which caused them to speed swiftly to a well-considered point of vantage, crouch beneath the long, sinister shadows of the house, and wait with eager eyes.

A gentleman, unattended except by a lantern bearer—a wizened old man—and with only a light rapier carried negligently under one arm, was strolling down the street at a leisurely pace. That he was a man

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of substance and consideration every night-walker saw at a glance. His dress was of rich material and the latest mode; his peruke a mountain of curls fearfully and wonderfully made. Even his heavy overcoat, worn loose and unbuttoned, as if the month were June instead of January, was stylishly cut, the cape giving just the requisite appearance of breadth to a figure inclined to be a shade too slim, the waist fitting like a glove, the skirts expansive, not to say voluminous, to allow free play to the limbs.

He walked carelessly, and looked neither to right nor left, and those who were watching him smiled. He came nearer and they braced their muscles for a spring. He was abreast of them and—they shrank back into the shadow, flattened themselves against the wall, and let him pass.

He had made only one movement—a turn of his head so that they could see his face—but that was enough.

It was not a face easily to be mistaken. Long and cadaverous, with high cheek-bones, a straight, prominent nose, full lips, and a long chin. A face which, at times, was extremely repulsive, but at other times was attractive and pleasing, for above the coarse mouth and obstinate chin, dominating them, were a noble forehead and a pair of large and beautiful eyes.

By the eyes of a man, say physiognomists, shall the elements of his character be known. This is true as a principle, but unfortunately is not to be applied to every case. In this instance, though the eyes could express on occasion friendship or hatred, anger, tenderness or love, now, when the face was in repose, they were as cold and unfathomable as the eyes of a dead man.

He was under thirty years of age, though he looked

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more, and his clear complexion and alertness of carriage showed him to be in the prime of physical strength. There was, indeed, a peculiar balance and grace of movement about him, acquired by a long course of severe training of the muscles of the body and limbs, one result of which was that this evening, though cumbered with heavy boots, he walked so lightly that he followed his little servant without sound, like an attendant spirit.

They were moving slowly, as if expecting some one, and at the slightest noise turned their heads to listen. At last the master touched his companion with his sheathed rapier, and stood still. Presently the sound of many feet tramping in unison was heard on the hard, frosty road, and round the corner came a sedan chair, escorted by four armed men in livery. As the chair came abreast of the pedestrians, the lantern bearer raised his light so that it shone full on his master's face. A head was instantly thrust from the chair, the bearers came to a stand, and a large elderly man rolled heavily out.

"Why, what is this?" he exclaimed. "Master Karl Brownker afoot on so bitter a night like some prowling grimalkin! Ho, ho! was ever such a man?"

"Nay—such a night, my lord. Only the sick—or the Earl of Tottenham—would ride to-night."

He doffed his hat with a respectful bow, while his lordship laughed aloud.

"Pinked, on my faith, for indolence! But when did Karl Brownker spare a foe—or friend?"

"If my thrust gives me the honour of your company, my lord, it will have served its purpose."

Lord Tottenham had begun to laugh again; but now stopped short.

"So you wished to speak to me, and feared I

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would begin a-shivering unless you shamed me. Pish! —You fellows”—to the chairmen—“follow at a distance.”

“I stopped you, my lord,” Mr. Brownker said as they turned and strolled away together, “because I thought you might be well advised to speak to me.”

He bowed again, but there was a penetrating incisiveness in his tone which made his companion bridle.

“Deed, good sir,” he said tartly, “there are some who can live without your favours.”

Mr. Brownker coolly shrugged his shoulders. “It is not true, then, that you dine to-night with the town’s talk, Mr. Hugh Montgomery.”

“Devil take it, sir, what business is that of yours?”

“It is my master’s,” was the tranquil reply.

“Not his either,” his lordship retorted with some heat. “My private affairs concern not King William nor any other man. You, who know everything, know that this lad is son of my old friend Ralf Montgomery——”

“And nephew, my lord, to Lady Susan Montgomery, suspected agent and open supporter of James Stuart.”

Lord Tottenham swore a rude oath.

“The worn-out old poll-parrot! If the King fears Lady Susan, then the deuce is in it!”

“The King fears no one, but he watches all, my lord.”

Lord Tottenham winced, and continued in a lower tone: “Hugh has never seen his aunt, and never will. I’ll answer for it he is no Jacobite.”

“It is, then, a pity,” Mr. Brownker said dryly, “that he invites so many Jacobites this evening.”

“They are his father’s friends. The boy knows



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not a soul in London but myself. You have overreached yourself this time."

He laughed hoarsely. Mr. Brownker echoed the laugh, at which his lordship quickly became grave again.

"The history of this boy," he said with emphasis, "is in every one's mouth. I marvel you should not know it."

"I have heard something," the other said modestly. "Until a month ago he was an ensign in the Fusiliers, as lean and hungry as a rat. Of a sudden he comes into £150,000, left him by his uncle, the rich merchant. And now he hath come to town, and will be, by all accounts, a very blade of fashion. He is an ambitious, reckless rat, boasting that he will take the court by storm, and the Lord knows what besides."

"You have it, you have it," his lordship said briskly, adding as if to himself, "even as I have Karl Brownker in a clutch." Mr. Brownker turned his head, though he did not speak. "I mean," his lordship continued in a light tone, but out of the corner of his eye closely watching his companion, "that I do now perceive the cause of your solicitude. This poor lad of mine has done you an ill turn."

At these words Mr. Brownker gave a sharp, hard laugh, but Lord Tottenham, who knew him well, saw his lips tighten and the smooth face grow dark as a thunder-cloud. "I do assure you, my lord," he said contemptuously, "he is no more to me than these night-hawks lurking in the streets, who run when I raise my eyes. But he is rich and of a headstrong nature, and, being his own master, he may become of some interest to King William in such troublous times as these."

He said the last words with quiet deliberation and distinctness.

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Lord Tottenham smiled knowingly, and took snuff.

"To argue with a king's agent," he said, "is but a thought less dangerous than arguing with a king. Yet, on my faith, it seems to me that this trade of intelligencing has well-nigh turned all our heads. Hugh is twenty-one years old, and since boyhood has served in his Majesty's army faithfully and well. Yet because he has been written on by the diurnals and signalizes his good fortune by a public dinner to gentlemen who knew his father at King Charles's court he becomes immediately a suspect, a traitor by default. Zounds, sir!" Lord Tottenham's tongue was not a well-guarded one. "I'd have you know, an' it come to that, I am the most intimate of all these friends!"

"I will inform his Majesty, my lord," said Mr. Brownker in his dryest tone.

"And you will add, I trust, that he has not a more faithful subject in this land."

"In England—surely not," was the answer, "but his Majesty might reply that does not mean over-much."

"A curse on your Dutch wit!" Lord Tottenham's temper had blazed up again. "A member of the King's Privy Council should be exempt from insult even from Master Brownker——"

"Ah! The Privy Council? Your lordship's pardon, I had quite forgotten you were a privy councillor."

Lord Tottenham muttered a curse.

"Your memory needs refreshing, sir."

"Nay; your lordship has done so. I will now, in all humbleness, refresh yours."

His voice was quiet and gentle; but he laid a hand on Lord Tottenham's arm, and looked at him

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with an expression of such significance that the earl's heat of manner died away.

"Go on," he said hoarsely, for Mr. Brownker paused.

"Your lordship's close attention. It is within my personal knowledge that certain members of King William's Privy Council have, within the last week, sent in addresses of allegiance to King James, and one of them——"

"Stop—on your life!"

Lord Tottenham's face grew rigid. He threw away the hand that touched him, and grasped his sword.

"You dog! Though I am no match for you in fence now, and may die for it, by God, you shall not call me traitor twice!"

Mr. Brownker laughed. He had good teeth, rather prominent, and he showed them all. "Traitor! Truly an ugly name. But it is of your lordship's choosing, not mine."

"Such an address to James is treason—black treason—and you said that——"

"One hath been writ by members of the Privy Council. Yes."

"Am I accused of it or not?"

"No."

The word came roundly, and Lord Tottenham's hand left his sword.

"But," added Mr. Brownker dryly, "your lordship must walk warily and mind your company."

"Then I am suspected."

"A pardon. We do not warn men whom we suspect."

"But my lad, now. He is suspect."

Mr. Brownker showed his teeth.

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"That fool is a honey-pot, about whom the flies are gathering to-night."

Lord Tottenham nodded.

"I see your full meaning; trust me to keep them off him."

"See you do it, my lord."

Mr. Brownker was not smiling now.

Again Lord Tottenham's fingers grasped his sword. "S'death, sir! Had his Majesty himself said as much in such a tone I had asked his meaning for it."

"I am his Majesty's mouthpiece—here."

Lord Tottenham made no reply for a moment. Then he said sullenly:

"In plain words, then, what doth he want of me?"

"The old story, my lord. A little more faith in his goodwill, a little better attention to his business, a little less complaisance towards his enemies."

"Enemies! I speak complaisantly to none."

"A pardon." Mr. Brownker spoke in his smoothest tones. "But your lordship cannot deny that you are bosom friend of the Earl of Marlborough."

Lord Tottenham started now in good earnest. He even so far forgot himself as to grasp his companion's arm.

"Marlborough! Jack Churchill! What hath he done?"

But Mr. Brownker shook his head, and walked on with a quicker step.

"Ask questions of his Majesty, my lord, not me. Hark! there is a church bell; we shall keep our entertainer waiting for his dinner."

"You are to be a guest, then?"

"I received an invitation rather late. But it was welcome."



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Lord Tottenham sighed.

"My poor lad, my poor lad!" he muttered.

"If I had £10,000 a year," Mr. Brownker said pensively, "I should not live in poverty."

"If Marlborough is out of favour, Hugh will be poorer, in a sense, than his neediest comrade," Lord Tottenham said bitterly. "Jack is Hugh's hero, as he is to every soldier who fights under him. A word against Lord Marlborough, and Hugh would defy the King himself. See here, Brownker, if you value my friendship or regard, guard your tongue in this lad's presence when you speak of Marlborough."

Mr. Brownker turned away, and Lord Tottenham did not see the expression of his face.

"I will confess," his lordship went on, "that Hugh is something hot and violent in his ways. He is his father's son."

Brownker looked up sharply.

"Mr. Ralf Montgomery, I heard, was killed in a duel."

"Murdered. He was no hand at fence, and he fought Lord Casterton."

"Casterton, my master! That is, I have seen him with foils. Doth this Montgomery fight duels?"

He spoke slowly. Lord Tottenham, peering into his face, saw him smile dreamily, as at some pleasant memory or anticipation.

"I trust not. A good soldier keeps his sword for the King's enemies."

Brownker sighed gently.

"His father, so they say, once sent a challenge to King Charles."

"It caused his death, and another's," was the reply. "You know the story?"

"I would give much to hear your lordship tell it."

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"I will. It may awaken your interest in this lad of mine."

"That is awake," Mr. Brownker replied gravely. "But I would increase my knowledge through his friends."

"It all came about by Hugh's mother," Lord Tottenham began. "She was reigning toast the Restoration year, and Charles pursued her even to her husband's house. Ralf, hearing this from her own lips, laid hands upon his Majesty, reckless of consequence, and challenged him. Of course the scandal was hushed up. The King made all amends he could, and ever treated Ralf with marked favour when they met afterward. But naught could heal the wound. The Montgomerys left court and lived quietly in the country, and there Hugh was nurtured. But his father ill-brooked a humdrum life, and used to spend much time in town alone. One day Casterton met him, and to court favour with the King, so he said afterward, taunted Ralf upon the amour with his wife. Ralf laid him by the heels in public and beat him savagely. They fought. I was Ralf's second, and I saw him pinked by that damned villain. God, Brownker, that sight sickened me of duelling forever! Before, I had done my share and a little more. I have done naught since."

"Nay—your lordship doth forget," said Mr. Brownker softly. His eyes were bright now, his face as animated as a fox-hunter's when he sees the hounds break off. "You fought one more, my lord—one more."

Lord Tottenham's teeth closed.

"I killed Casterton. I could never have faced Ralf's wife again if Casterton had lived."

"Yet your lordship never married, after all. For-

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give me. I do not speak from curiosity, but for a purpose, and from knowledge——”

His voice was gentle now and sympathetic, his face grave. Lord Tottenham gave a short laugh.

“Deuce take you, Brownker! Where do you get your knowledge? Yet, since you know something, you shall know all; though why I do confide to you I cannot tell,” and he broke off again.

“Your lordship’s confidence is not misplaced.”

The men looked steadily at each other in the moonlight, and Lord Tottenham nodded.

“I believe that. I never married, then, because Margaret Montgomery could not forget her husband. She spent her life bringing up that boy—Hugh. He was his father’s image, and hers—and hers! On her deathbed she sent for me, made me his guardian, and gave his life into my charge. As God is my witness, Brownker, that life is dearer than my own—dearer than anything I have on earth—as dear as if he were indeed my son.”

They were in a broader thoroughfare now, tolerably lighted; on the opposite side of the road stood a large well-appointed building. Before its broad stone steps were a throng of coaches and chairs; round its doors lounged a group of servants in brilliant liveries. It was the St. James’s Club-house, Pall Mall, the most fashionable resort of the day.

By a mutual impulse the men paused, and then Lord Tottenham touched his companion on the shoulder.

“I have never told this to a man before.”

“My lord, my lips are sealed.”

“Ay, ay. But a confidence deserves a confidence. Now tell me this: What is your real purpose in forcing an acquaintance with my boy? You know, as well as

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I do, that he is simple-hearted, loyal, true. What is in your mind?"

Mr. Brownker smiled—a smile that was not pleasant to see.

"Your lordship has answered your own question. A gentleman such as you describe is so rare to find in England that I would go to the land's end just to see him. So would his Majesty."

"Pish!" cried his lordship. "Tell me more than that."

"I will, my lord."

The words were spoken quietly, but something in their tone made Lord Tottenham hold his breath.

"I have to put some in this place to a test of loyalty. A test that would break the teeth, I do assure you, of half the Privy Council, though not, I think, your lordship's. That is my purpose here to-night."

"Something has happened."

Mr. Brownker stifled a yawn, but his eyes were gleaming still.

"Ay—a little thing—so common that it is hardly worthy of remark to Englishmen. Another plot against King William's life, my lord, in which a certain member of the Government—a noble—and a gallant earl——"

"You dare!"

"*I know.*"

They faced one another, and Lord Tottenham dropped his eyes.

"Tell me more," he said hoarsely, "tell me all."

"Not now. We should miss our dinner." And he began to cross the road.

"But to-night—" Lord Tottenham whispered, following him. "What shall you do to-night?"



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"My duty, and best endeavours, my lord, in the service of the King." He had reached the steps, and now handed his coat and hat to a servant, and then, amid the bows of the attendants of the club, entered first.

## CHAPTER II

A LONG table, well furnished with costly glass and silver, and flanked with tankards of wine; on either side two score of gentlemen preparing for an evening's enjoyment. Some, if the wine proved good enough, to drink until they were unable to lift a glass; the rest, after partaking as freely as their heads would allow it, to retire to the card-rooms and play hazard until morning. In other words, except for the selectness of the company, it was an ordinary, every-day dinner of the period.

One person present, however, considered the occasion far from being an ordinary one. Hugh Montgomery for the first time in his life was about to entertain men of his own rank, and of greater rank than his own, in a manner suitable to their position. Hugh Montgomery was, in consequence, extremely nervous. For the first time he was clad in a resplendent suit, made by the best tailor in town; for the first time he mixed as an equal with men of the first fashion in the land. It might be that their motives for accepting his invitation were mixed, and that for the most part the exquisites of the English aristocracy who honoured Hugh Montgomery's board to-night, came to see how this translated subaltern of a line regiment comported himself under the weight of his new fortunes. But they came; and Hugh, blissfully unconscious of their motives, was happy.

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In the seventeenth century such a rise in life as this attracted much more attention than it would do now, perhaps because there were fewer people who had £10,000 a year. The diurnals were full of it, as Lord Tottenham had said, and sketched the fortunate man's career with the customary journalistic embellishments to such purpose that Hugh, waking one day to find himself rich, woke the next to find himself famous. As an item of society gossip for at least a week, his affairs put the execution of a notorious highwayman into the shade and ran the latest court scandal close.

What could an ambitious young man want more? Not Hugh Montgomery, though as yet he knew nothing of court scandals. He was in perfect health, and he had an easy conscience. Hard work, and harder discipline, had braced, not broken, his strength and spirits. He had not an enemy that he knew of, and had many warm friends. The world was before him, smiling pleasantly.

Hugh had only one anxiety: that this, his first public entertainment, should be an unqualified success.

Lord Tottenham and Mr. Brownker were the last guests to arrive, but a vacant place on Hugh's right hand had been reserved for my lord, and, when Mr. Brownker was introduced as his lordship's friend—Lord Tottenham had his reasons for making this statement—room was made for that gentleman close by. Opposite to the earl, on Hugh's left, was the colonel of his old regiment, and Lord Tottenham noticed with secret amusement that other officers in the Fusiliers, though in some instances of very humble rank, took precedence at their comrade's table of men of rank and fashion.

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"He forgets not his old friends," he whispered to Mr. Brownker.

"He forgets his own interests," was the rejoinder. "A fig for his old friends!"

The words were spoken under cover of the noise occasioned by the beginning of dinner. It was one of the best dinners ever served at the St. James's, and was done ample justice to; but there were two men present who scarcely knew what they were eating. Mr. Brownker was keenly studying the face of his host, his eyes following every movement of the man; while Lord Tottenham, though talking and laughing with the rest, closely studied Mr. Brownker.

As for Hugh Montgomery, he was as unconscious of this by-play as a frolicsome young spring-bok stalked by his first lion. His initial nervousness was over; his heart was warmed with good wine; and he was brimming over with the milk of human kindness. His nature held little pride and no fear, and he took men as he found them—mostly at the value they chose to set upon themselves. Consequently he was popular. Moreover, he greeted all alike, and was as simple and as natural in his treatment of the stiffest and most exclusive man of fashion as of one of his fellow sub-alterns.

Mr. Brownker caught Lord Tottenham's eye. "A pity," he whispered, "that the manners of the camp are so manifest. Watch the faces round. All the gilt upon this pill will hardly serve to get it down."

"Yet it goes down," my lord replied, as a burst of laughter broke out about him at some droll story the host told against himself. "I have not heard my Lord Haliburton shake his sides so heartily these five years past. But, Lord save us," he exclaimed, "what is the boy doing now?"



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It was indeed a startling sight. Lord Haliburton, a powdered, rouged old beau of the last generation, had choked violently in his merriment, upon which Hugh, oblivious of his rank and age, had administered to him a vigorous blow on the back, and nearly knocked all the remaining breath out of the old gentleman's body. The incident caused a louder roar of laughter than the story, and his lordship became purple in the face, upon which Hugh, in sincere contrition, humbly apologized.

There is always something attractive in a youngster in full strength of manhood earnestly blaming his own vigour, and in this instance Lord Haliburton, to every one's surprise, recovered his temper at once, and even made a feeble joke himself, at which Hugh laughed with all his might. After this the flow of mirth and good-fellowship became stronger than ever. The dinner promised to be a remarkable success.

Now Hugh, flushed with the pride of appreciated hospitality, rose with a bumper of wine.

"A toast, gentlemen all. The King! God bless him!"

A sudden silence fell upon the table. Faces clouded over, laughter died away. Only the soldiers present honoured the toast with alacrity and decent warmth. The rest, except Lord Tottenham and Mr. Brownker, made a very cold response, while some even muttered a name which was certainly not William.

Hugh, startled and greatly discomfited, had just resumed his seat, when Mr. Brownker addressed him in tones that were heard all over the room.

"You will note, sir, that some of your friends have mistaken the meaning of your toast—unless I have mistaken it myself."



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"Mistake!" Hugh answered sharply. "There could be no mistake. I said the King."

"In the best society, sir, it is customary to say which King."

Mr. Brownker spoke blandly, but with a studied superiority that cut Hugh to the quick. He hastily filled another glass to the brim, and held it high.

"*The King!* If any gentleman disputes the title of his Majesty, King William, my sword is at his service—ay, even though he is my guest." And tossing off the wine at a draught, he gave Mr. Brownker an aggressive nod, which to his surprise was greeted by the rest of the company with a peal of laughter. Mr. Brownker moved not a muscle.

"Your sword, sir," he replied, "will not, in this company, rust for want of use."

Hugh flushed crimson, and his hands twitched.

"These gentlemen are my father's friends and mine, and are not to be insulted at my table."

There was another laugh, in which Mr. Brownker joined; but Lord Tottenham's deep voice chimed in at the moment, asserting that Mr. Montgomery was right, evoking an immediate response from the soldiers. In the midst of this Hugh sat down, and with an effort, turning away from Mr. Brownker, began to talk to his colonel. But his joy of the evening had departed. A shadow had come between him and his friends, or those who might have become his friends—a shadow no effort of his could drive away.

Hugh had joined the army soon after the coronation of William and Mary. He was little more than a boy at the time, and had been brought up far from any centre of social or political life. His only companion was his mother, a devout hater of the Stuarts, and, moreover, the daughter of a man who had been

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a close friend of Cromwell's. Once in the army, custom and discipline, and the fact that William was not unpopular, made loyalty easy and natural. Hugh, therefore, the army having been the only world he knew, was utterly ignorant of Jacobitism. Nor was he as yet acquainted with the names of men most influential in politics beyond the well-known noblemen of mark. But Hugh was not wanting in perception or the faculty of learning from experience, and seeing that he had made himself absurd by suspecting Mr. Brownker to be of Jacobite tendencies, and had stirred up a hornet's nest by his challenge for King William, he wisely endeavoured to divert the thoughts of his guests into safer channels, and turned his back resolutely upon an inhospitable desire to pick a quarrel with this very disagreeable stranger.

Meanwhile Lord Tottenham had plucked Mr. Brownker by the sleeve.

"I spoke truth. He is loyal to the bone."

Mr. Brownker's only reply was a significant lift of the eyebrows, and after a short interval he addressed Hugh again.

"I ask your pardon," he said in the tone of one conferring a favour upon an inferior, "if I seemed to cast a doubt upon your principles. But these are times—you will grasp my meaning before long—when a man is like to be suspicious of his brother. Will you drink this toast with me?" He raised his glass, and the ghost of a sardonic smile curved about his loose lips and deepened the lines of his hard face. "Confusion to all who, having sworn allegiance to King William, yet correspond in writing, and by word of mouth, with the agents of King James!"

"On that," Hugh answered, "I take you willingly."

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Death and confusion to all traitors in the land, be they whom they may!"

Their glasses clinked, and the soldiers rapped the table with their knuckles; but from other parts of the table came a murmur of disgust. Several even pushed back their chairs as if about to leave.

Mr. Brownker looked slowly round, and his smile deepened and widened. He had, certainly, exceedingly prominent front teeth.

"What! Am I breaking up the good company? Yet, if it teaches Mr. Montgomery to be wiser and more prudent in his choice of friends, it is well worth it."

At these words Hugh started to his feet, expecting to see violent hands laid upon the speaker for his insulting words. But no one moved or spoke. Some strange awe of this pale, slight man with his gleaming eyes and ugly mouth seemed to hold them spell-bound. Hugh turned on him, blazing with indignation.

"Sir, you have said enough. The politics of these gentlemen are not your business. Yet I thank you for one lesson you have taught me. I should be wiser, you have said, and more prudent in my choice of guests. Truly, I will remember this when next it is suggested that I invite you to my table."

A murmur of amazement greeted these ominous words, and Hugh's colonel, a gray-haired veteran, caught him by the arm.

"Fool! You speak to the King's agent," he whispered. "Apologize before it is too late."

But Hugh's blood was up.

"At my table," he said aloud, "not the King himself should insult my company, and still remain a guest."

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Applause followed these words, though men began to hold their breath for what was to follow, and a dead silence fell upon them all when Mr. Brownker opened his lips to reply. He bowed to Hugh, vacated his chair, and placed it against the table.

"There is only one thing for me to say," he was beginning, when Lord Tottenham started up, and brought a heavy hand down upon his shoulder.

"Let me speak first. S'dearth, gentlemen all, rouse up and stop this quarrel. A curse upon you both! Flying at each other's throats, and with no more reason than two dogs! What is it all about? Nothing.—Hugh, this gentleman represents his Majesty, and so has a right to be jealous for his master.—Brownker"—here his lordship lowered his voice—"what devil possesses you to-night?"

But the earl's protest fell on deaf ears. Hugh only shrugged his shoulders, while Mr. Brownker quietly disengaged himself from the restraining hand.

"I was about to say," he remarked, "that Mr. Montgomery cannot face both ways. His devotion to the King is but skin deep while he consorts with men who will not drink his health. I will tender this advice——"

Hugh burst into an insulting laugh.

"Who gave you authority to tender me advice?"

Mr. Brownker smiled amiably.

"My report to the King must be, then, that Mr. Hugh Montgomery prefers traitors to his Majesty's good name."

"Your report will be a lie."

At this fatal word, Mr. Brownker slightly changed his position and laid a hand on his sword, while Hugh, casting to one side a chair that was in his way, advanced upon him. But before either could draw his



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weapon, Lord Tottenham had thrust himself between them.

"This must not be," he said between his teeth, his face white and rigid. "Hugh, you have forgot that this gentleman is still your guest.—Mr. Brownker, if you draw, I will hand you over to an officer of law."

Mr. Brownker gave a low laugh. "How considerate and courteous! But your lordship leaves me no choice. Since this young gentleman cannot defend himself——"

Lord Tottenham gnashed his teeth.

"Damn you, be silent! This is all your doing. You set a trap, baited it, spurred him into it, and now—but I will foil you. Fight if you will, but by God, you shall fight me!" And seizing a glass of wine, he tried to throw its contents into Brownker's smiling face. The earl had counted, however, without Hugh Montgomery. His hand was caught as he raised it, and the glass dashed in fragments on the floor. There was then a sharp struggle between them, for Lord Tottenham was beside himself with passion; but the strength of the young man conquered, and Hugh, gently but firmly thrusting his guardian aside, stood foot to foot with Brownker. Yet short as the struggle was, it sobered Hugh, as the controlling of another's rage will often do.

"Your pardon, my lord," he said very quietly, "but this is my affair." Then to Mr. Brownker: "His lordship was just in his reproof. You are my guest; I crave your pardon."

Mr. Brownker's bitter smile vanished.

"It is granted," he said curtly, and Lord Tottenham drew a long breath of relief.

"You will be friends," he cried, catching up a decanter, "and drown all in a bumper."



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But Mr. Brownker did not move.

"So frank an apology," he said, "demands acknowledgment in kind. But I will intrude no further on Mr. Montgomery's hospitality."

"And I, my lord," Hugh said, looking Mr. Brownker steadily in the eyes, "hold myself at Mr. Brownker's service, if he doth desire to meet me."

"He does not desire it," interposed the earl quickly. He had recovered his self-control, though his face was anxious. "He cannot, for he is one who holds a place of great responsibility, and for every act is personally answerable to his Majesty the King."

Mr. Brownker smiled without bitterness.

"Your lordship strikes heavily and home; but you remind me of a thing I had forgotten. Gentlemen," he turned from Hugh, and leaning on the table looked from face to face, "before I leave your presence, I have some news concerning a nobleman well known to every one."

He paused, and the room was still as death.

"The King has been pleased to-day to dismiss the Earl of Marlborough from all his offices."

The sensation caused by this announcement was profound. Consternation spread from face to face. The soldiers groaned aloud, and Hugh swore a round, full-flavoured military oath.

"His Majesty hath thrown away the services of the greatest man in England."

Mr. Brownker turned upon him swiftly.

"You are, then, well acquainted with the earl?"

There was a keen inquiry in his tone, which struck Hugh and Lord Tottenham at the same moment. Hugh forgot it afterward, but the earl did not forget.

"I have served under Lord Marlborough, and if I

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live a week I hope to pay my respects to him and to his lady," Hugh answered proudly. "He is a noble gentleman."

The old mocking smile played about Mr. Brownker's lips.

"You would rather serve him than the King."

"I would serve him—as he would serve King William—to the death."

Mr. Brownker showed his teeth.

"But my Lord Marlborough has been openly accused of treason."

"Who says that?"

Hugh's face had become colourless and hard. His chest heaved slowly, as if he were in pain. Mr. Brownker laughed.

"Ask my Lord of Tottenham."

"Who—says that?"

The words came like an echo in a low strained voice.

"I say it," Mr. Brownker answered in a quiet, even tone, watching Hugh as a lion tamer watches a troublesome pupil. Then he stepped quickly aside, but it was too late. Hugh had leaped upon him and struck him a blow upon the chest that dashed him backward on the floor.

"You liar!"

There was a gasp of amazement, and then, while half a dozen men sprang forward to help Mr. Brownker to his feet, Lord Tottenham and some of the soldiers threw themselves on Hugh. Their attentions were superfluous. Mr. Brownker rose without assistance as lightly as he fell, while Hugh stood quite still and waited. He had not to wait long.

"Accept my compliments," Mr. Brownker said with cold politeness, delicately dusting his coat with a

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silk handkerchief, "you have disposed of all impediments. We will arrange now."

"I am your servant, sir," Hugh said in the same tone. "My lord"—he turned to Lord Tottenham with a frank, boyish smile—"once you stood my father's friend. Now you will stand mine?"

"Great God," exclaimed the earl shuddering, "that it should come to this! But I do it," he said abruptly. "May the Lord help you, boy!"

"Amen," said Mr. Brownker; and Lord Tottenham was not the only man who shuddered at the quiet assurance of his tone.

"The weapons!" he added. "Your choice."

"Small swords, of course," cried Lord Tottenham before Hugh could speak.

"Your lordship's pardon," Hugh interrupted coolly. "Fois."

Mr. Brownker smiled grimly, while Lord Tottenham groaned, and striding to the table tossed off a glass of wine. His hand was shaking; his forehead clammy with perspiration. He dashed down the glass and broke it.

"So help me God," he cried, "I will not stand by again to see a murder done! It must be small swords."

But the young men, who had drawn aside from the rest and were talking in whispers, paid no attention to him, and the colonel, to whom he now appealed, shook his head. "Let be, my lord," he said sadly, "no small sword would draw blood enough to wash that insult out."

Meanwhile Hugh and Mr. Brownker completed their arrangements.

"I would sooner it had been to-morrow," Hugh said politely, "but your time is mine."

"I have business to-morrow"—Mr. Brownker

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coughed—"business which I may not neglect. Let us say, the fields near Hampstead at dawn on the next day.

Hugh nodded, then moved back to the table and took up a decanter of wine. He was smiling into Mr. Brownker's eyes.

"Drink with me," he said quickly. "All is done now, and—and—perhaps my blow was harder than I did intend."

Mr. Brownker smiled back, and bowed acceptance. Then before the astonished company they pledged each other.

"Good fortune and a long life to you!" Mr. Brownker said. The glasses touched.

"To both of us!" Hugh cried impulsively, and laughed.

"Nay," said the other very quietly, with a most courtly bow, "it cannot be to both."

Then he wiped his lips slowly with a handkerchief. "Sir, your servant.—My Lord Tottenham, your humble servant.—Gentlemen, a good evening to you all."

In this way, and with an elaborate salute, Mr. Brownker took his leave, his manner, face, and bearing expressing the serene content of a man who has accomplished in a manner entirely satisfactory some very profitable stroke of business for himself.

### CHAPTER III

AT Mr. Brownker's departure Hugh Montgomery's company rapidly melted away. They went with many and various excuses, all of which Hugh received with a bad grace, comparing himself to a sinking ship deserted by the rats. He was unjust. These guests, Jacobites, as Mr. Brownker had told Lord Tottenham, almost to a man, would have overwhelmed him with professions of friendship the moment the King's agent turned his back had they not perceived that the quarrel was personal, not political. The younger men, it was true, were fired with enthusiasm at the courage of a raw young soldier, who could so recklessly insult one who was reputed to be the deadliest duellist in England; but so engrossed were they all by more important matters nearer home that even this interesting event received but a passing thought.

Marlborough was down! Marlborough, the moving spirit of the army; the only soldier for the Protestant cause who had never been defeated by the French; the man William had created earl, groom of the bed-chamber, privy councillor, and whom he consulted confidentially in military affairs. Marlborough was stripped without warning of all his offices, and dismissed from court in disgrace. It was a thunderbolt. What had happened? Above all, what would happen next? These were the thoughts which engrossed the minds of Hugh's fashionable guests to the exclusion of



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all others, and sent them hurrying homeward in chairs, coaches, and afoot, in a state of sobriety and decorum which filled the club waiters with astonishment and disgust.

Hugh, left with Lord Tottenham and the officers of the Fusiliers, suggested that they should make a night of it, and drink confusion to all the King's enemies, and their own, in bumpers. He was flushed and excited, as young men are when they have put down their last stake in the game of life and death. He was not afraid, but he knew the risk he ran, and life was sweet.

The soldiers, however, tried friends and true, shook their heads, and went their way. Rest by night and hard exercise by day—these were the needful preliminaries for Hugh to the meeting in the Hampstead fields.

Lord Tottenham knew this well; and the soldiers having departed, he carried Hugh off to his own house, Tottenham Place, standing near the present site of Berkeley Square. Hugh himself had a bachelor establishment in Westminster, pending the purchase of an estate in the country, which, up to this evening, had been his chief interest in life.

Tottenham Place was a huge establishment, but there was only one really interesting room in it. This room, the library, its owner had made his home until it had become a very part of him, and a faithful reflection of his personality. In this room, walled about with books he never read and which were mouldering to decay, his lordship ate and drank, transacted business, and entertained his friends and his enemies. There, deep in the oaken panelling, lay embedded the end of a broken foil with which a Jacobite spy had treacherously drawn upon him, thrust at his heart, and missed.

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Lord Tottenham would never allow the steel to be removed. He said it was a refreshment, now that he was getting gouty, to see before him a proof that he had been active once. The sequel of the story he refused to talk about. When pressed hard by a friend, he would take a pinch of snuff and kick aside a rug at the other end of the room. The floor was polished oak, but at this place there was a long black stain.

"He fought well," my lord would say, then he kicked the rug back, and changed the subject.

Throughout the room were trophies of the chase, specimens of British fauna, stuffed with my lord's own hands, such as in these days though sportsmen see, they never catch. A monstrous pike, a white otter, a grinning wild-cat, almost leopard size, a perch weighing above five pounds. In the corners of the room were fishing-rods and guns, all neatly placed in racks—more of his lordship's handiwork. Over the great fire-place hunting whips, a pair of foils in good condition, and beneath, portraits of the Tottenham racing stud, the finest in the country.

As a centre-piece this night, completing the picture and bringing all its various features into harmony, was my lord himself, sitting in his great arm-chair, mixing for a night-cap a special and particular brew of brandy punch. The Earl of Tottenham was as fine an example of the English nobleman of the period as one might find in a day's march. Broad in the shoulders and deep in the chest, with brawny hands, and limbs a lad of twenty might have envied, they were so straight and muscular. He carried himself well, and, despite his fifty years and increasing weight, was in hard condition. His face was not refined. The jaw was too square, the lips too full. But it was the

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face of a good sportsman, keen, shrewd, firm—a man of quick perception, strong will, and courage; a bad enemy, and a good friend.

The water in the kettle boiled, and Lord Tottenham was very busy for a few minutes, watched by Hugh with respectful interest; for the art of making really good punch was a coveted one, and Lord Tottenham's brew was famous. The business done, my lord critically sipped his mixture, and while Hugh praised it, reached out a long arm for a pipe hanging on the wall.

"The first time we have spent an evening together, lad, since the old man died."

"I should have been here before," Hugh answered hastily, but I—but there have been so many engagements——"

"Pshaw!" ejaculated his lordship. "Of course there are engagements. An't you young—and I old? You have the new plays to see, and the cards, and the pretty women. Hey, what! Frowning! Ho, ho, ho! spoil not your manhood by a frown. 'Fore gad, you are your father's son, lad! And your father was—well—he was my friend and Jack Churchill's—I mean Marlborough's—in the blessed Restoration days. Ho, ho, ho!" and his lordship laughed until he choked himself.

Hugh flushed to the roots of his hair, and did not laugh. He was of a fair complexion—a great tribulation to him—and had curly hair—a worse misfortune still, in his eyes—that grew long enough to reach his shoulders. He wore it naturally, without powder or peruke. His eyes, set wide apart, were blue as a summer sky, and though soldiering had roughened his cheek, tightened his lips, and straightened his jaw, and from a height of six feet two inches he could survey

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the world from a distinctly independent standpoint, he looked very young and fresh. He spoke now with a curious abruptness. "You said once, my lord, that I was my mother's son."

Lord Tottenham became closely interested in his pipe. "You have not forgot your mother," he said softly. Hugh gave a bitter laugh.

"When I do, my lord, I shall be worse than any of my ancestors."

Lord Tottenham glanced keenly up. Hugh was still flushed, but his teeth were set now and he was looking grimly into the fire. There was no lack of strength about the face, but Lord Tottenham thought it very, very young.

"Your father was a brave and generous man, my boy."

"He left my mother"—and Hugh looked grimmer still—"while he spent her money and his own in town. Because of her poverty she slowly killed herself with work—the hardest work. I judge him not, nor any other man, but the truth's the truth."

Lord Tottenham sighed.

"And 'twas I who told you, when first you joined the army. I thought that you should know it for her sake. But maybe I was wrong. Poor Ralf!"

"I have thanked you on my knees," Hugh cried earnestly. "It has held me back from—from doing things time and again. But it is just this makes me grudge that you should think I had followed his example."

Lord Tottenham grunted disapprovingly. He had lit his pipe, and was now in that condition of reposefulness which good tobacco produces in all well-regulated minds and bodies; and he resented Hugh's strenuousness, as an elderly tom-cat, who has seen the



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world, resents the simplicity of some young puppy that he has taken under his protection.

"Pish!" he growled. "Are you a Puritan, then! I smell you—I smell you. A rank one, too. But cheer up; your time will come. 'Sh! don't draw on me! You are, at present, all too innocent to be alive, and I must change the subject, or I'll quarrel with you. I detest all Puritans, and ever did, and ever will."

"Yet my mother was one, and you were her best friend, my lord," said Hugh smiling. "And to me you have been a guardian so vigilant and wise that in the service I have lived on less than any other officer."

Lord Tottenham groaned deeply. "I have often grieved over that, and pictured how your ears would grow longer year by year, your eyes turn up, and your lips turn down. I would have lost a limb if I could have withheld the promise to your mother to preach morality to you. But she beseeched me on her death-bed, so I gave my tongue a twist and sent ye pious counsel. God forgive me! And now, on my own hearthstone, you stand in judgment over me. Well-a-day, well-a-day! Yet methinks there will be no lack of spending now, eh? Tell me you can spend, and set my mind at rest."

Hugh looked a trifle foolish.

"There is little left, I fear, of the hundred pounds I had three days ago. The stakes were high, and my luck was bad last night."

"A hundred in three days!" purred his lordship complacently. "Then there is hope! Blood tells—blood always tells. You are a Montgomery, and if you weren't, let me tell ye, your mother's father was no crop-ear. Many a good bottle of wine had he, they say, with his friend, old Noll, for black-hearted regi-



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cide as Cromwell was, he was no puling water-drinker. And now, there will be no lack of wine for you, nor of play, nor of—of—devil take it, lad, of all else that makes life joyous, and turns a boy into a man. Tell me this, now; you do not hate women, do ye? I have heard there are such men, though, thank my stars, I've never hit on 'em."

Hugh burst out laughing, and held up his glass.

"The health of all the women in the world. If you knew how I have bewailed my poverty when the rest were off to foot it at a ball, and I had to stay behind because I was too poor! But that's over, thanks to Uncle Dan. Women! You'll see, my lord. The estate I intend buying is for one now; but if there's a maid in England that comes up to my ideal, it will be for two, within a year. But I have seen none yet, so this is foolish talk."

"Foolish!" cried his lordship with a disgusted face. "Most accursed foolish. You marry! Gad! Talk of marriage five years hence, when the world, and the men—ay, and women—mark ye that, boy—women—have given you some taste and judgment about things, and have driven wisdom into your rattle-pate. Marry! Heaven forbid! But now, a truce to nonsense. On the morning after to-morrow you are to fight Karl Brownker. How many men have you fought already, and whom?"

Lord Tottenham's voice was now sharp, curt, and business-like. Hugh shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"This is my first with foils."

Lord Tottenham dropped his pipe—a very precious, deeply-coloured clay—and deliberately stamped it into powder. Then he swore a most improper oath, twice. Then he lay back in his chair, and gasped out:

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"And you meet Brownker. Boy, you're as good as dead—as good as dead."

Hugh coolly stirred his toddy.

"That is as it may be. That man dared to slander Marlborough. I could do naught else, and if God wills it——"

"God!" interrupted the earl, "God hath not much to do with duels, boy; nor, I fear, with Jack Marlborough. Pish! don't look at me like that. I say you were in the wrong to-night. What Marlborough can have done, the Lord knows; but Brownker is an officer of the King's household, and was within his rights. None but a madman would have drawn him on to blood."

"Your lordship did give me an example," Hugh said demurely.

"I? Drat you! That was another matter. And two fools don't make a wise man, younker, any more than a smooth-spoken, pretty-faced, double-edged courtier, like my old friend Jack Churchill, makes a hero. Mark that!"

Hugh crimsoned all over.

"I pray you, leave my general alone, my lord. I will not hear him so miscalled, even by you."

"Hoity, toity," cried his lordship. "What? Touch not the Lord's anointed! Let me tell you, boy, I have known this noble person thirty odd years——"

"Your lordship has never served under him."

"No, praised be the Lord, else I had been insubordinate a dozen times a week. Hugh, your freshness is amazing, and on my soul, doth begin to pall. Marlborough hath qualities; oh, he hath qualities. I will give Jack his due. Did we not fish and hunt together as boys, and make love together, too, long years ago! Why, there was a day when Mistress Sarah Jennings

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and myself— But no more of that. In short, we have been intimates near all our lives, and are so still. I love Jack. I can't help loving him. But I *know* him. 'Pon my word, you will tell me next I do not know myself."

Lord Tottenham spoke with heat, and a convincing emphasis, but if he thought to impress Hugh he was far out of his reckoning. The young soldier only waited with ill-concealed impatience until his lordship had finished.

"Lord Marlborough, my lord," he exclaimed, "I do assure you, I think the greatest man alive. At Walcourt, through the indulgence of my colonel, I was on staff duty, and was near him more than once. It was a stiff engagement, the result long doubtful. Our officers were distraught, the Prince of Waldeck in despair. But Marlborough, when defeat seemed certain, when the foot were driven back, the guns silenced, and the town like to be taken by assault, sat his horse as serenely as if victory were sure. He was like one waiting for a word from heaven. Of a sudden he spoke to the prince and pointed with his finger. The prince nodded, and then Marlborough struck his blow, and, marking the one weak spot in the enemy's battalion, led the Life Guards 'gainst their flank. Charge after charge we made. It was no child's play; but at length the lines were broken; they fled; their whole army fell into confusion, and we held the field. The King, they say, gave the prince the credit of it all; but we know who won that victory. Ay—and who beat the Irish at Kinsale and Cork, and whom we'll follow—if he were to say the word—to the pit itself."

Lord Tottenham nodded with a grunt. His brow had cleared. Hugh's enthusiasm was not without effect.

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"Well, well; so be it. I am no soldier." Then, rising with a yawn, "To bed, my boy. To-morrow we will go more particularly into this business of the duel. But not to-night."

They went to Hugh's bed-chamber. As Lord Tottenham was about to close the door, Hugh stopped him.

"I crave a favour of you."

"And welcome, lad."

"A week since I wrote to my Lord of Marlborough, asking permission to pay my respects to him. He replied most kindly, and invited me to ride down to St. Albans six days hence. I have resolved to go to-morrow, as it may be the only opportunity I shall ever have. Would you—is it asking too much?—will you ride with me?"

Lord Tottenham swore aloud.

"What! Zounds! Ride twenty miles to see this Lord Marlborough?" Then he laughed. "I am jealous, on my oath, as any woman. Yet, we will go. The thought strikes me—but that is my business—we will go. Now, to sleep with you. They shall call ye be-times, before we start. I have some little turns of fence to show you that may be useful. Good-night; sleep sound, my boy."

He retreated hastily to cut short Hugh's thanks, then walked very slowly to his own chamber, set his candle down, and paced the room.

"Marlborough," he said to himself. "Jack Marlborough. Hugh hath writ to him, and Marlborough writes back, and Brownker said—what did Brownker say?" He shook his head. "I can't remember, but I know that when he found Hugh was like to go to Marlborough's house he hardened down and brought the quarrel to a head. It is clear Marlborough is the



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magnet that draws that Brownker and Hugh to death gripe. They fight on Marlborough. And if Jack knew it! Gad! there is hope. Jack loves not duels. He shall be told. He shall prevent it. At least the chance is worth a ride. So that is settled."

His lordship yawned and undressed. By the time he was in bed, a reaction had set in.

"Is it worth it? I had forgot she will be there. Yet I must go now." He sighed heavily and shivered. "The gods grant her temper is in order."

He closed his eyes, and began to get drowsy.

"A beauty—what a beauty! But a devil. A good wife, they say, and a true one, yet the Lord be thanked—the Lord be thanked—it was not I who married Sarah."

And then he fell asleep.

## CHAPTER IV

THOSE were days when men kept early hours. Breakfast was served by candle-light at six o'clock. By seven, the morning being clear and fine, Lord Tottenham and Hugh were at work with the foils on the terrace, and by eight word was brought by a groom that the horses were ready for the St. Albans expedition.

The earl was not sorry. He had been a fencer in his day, and was able to teach Hugh much ; but the onslaughts of the young soldier were extremely vigorous, and his lordship was very tired.

"Keep your head, lad, and you may get through yet. You have a marvellous reach, and a rare, quick eye."

"They used to tell me," Hugh said modestly, "that I had a strong arm."

"Humph!" growled his lordship, tenderly feeling the muscles of his arm. "That is true. Yet think not to hold your own with Brownker. The most I hope for is that he will be careless, seeing the rudeness of your style, and perchance, even, be scratched first. Then I could stop the fight. Strength! Pish! he is strong enough, and light and nimble as a cat. You are as stiff made as some great mastiff dog."

This opinion, given with all his lordship's accustomed vigour, was not encouraging, and Hugh's face fell.

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They dressed and took the road. It was bright and frosty, and the horses were thoroughbred. Hugh soon recovered his spirits. Lord Tottenham was in the best of humours.

"I wonder," he said with a sudden laugh, "how you will please her ladyship. Mightily, I think, until she finds you not as simple as you look."

He wagged his head and chuckled, as if in anticipation of mirth to come.

"Tell me of the countess," said Hugh eagerly. "In the army men said she was the greatest beauty at the court, though past thirty."

"Hem!" coughed his lordship gravely, his eyes twinkling. "And what else did they say?"

"That she had so great a spirit even the Queen Mary could scarce contradict her, which was why the countess seldom goes to court."

The earl began to laugh internally, while Hugh went on in all sincerity:

"A worthy mate she must be, by all accounts, for our great general."

Lord Tottenham stopped laughing.

"Egad!" he cried impatiently, "has the man conquered Europe then?"

"He might if the King—" Hugh stopped here, remembering last night.

"Were of your opinion?" Lord Tottenham said testily. "Then I will tell you a state secret. His Majesty thinks just the same, and has turned my Lord Marlborough out, fearing lest he might conquer Europe—for King James."

"You don't believe that lie, my lord?"

Hugh looked severely into his lordship's face, and Lord Tottenham felt like a prisoner called upon to plead.

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"Nay, I do not," he answered grimly. "Because it would not profit Marlborough. He would lose all here, and James is a bad paymaster. If it did profit Jack, well, I do not know. Look not so savage. If you go to draw on all who distrust Marlborough you'll have to fight half England and every man upon the Privy Council, beginning with myself."

St. Albans was reached in three hours—a brisk and bustling town. They trotted through it without pause, up the long hill and along the market-place, leaving the abbey on their left, and so onward to the straggling hamlet of Sandridge, from which could be seen, embowered in trees, their destination, Hollywell House.

The road here was little better than a lane; low hedges on either side, dividing it from large fields of cultivated land. To the left the ground rose to some height, topped by a clump of trees.

Suddenly Lord Tottenham, whose eyes were roving the country round, pulled in with an exclamation.

"Look ye, lad, on the top of yonder hill. Is not a petticoat there? Tell me. Your eyes are younger than mine."

"A man and a woman, my lord, are just within the trees."

Lord Tottenham gave a whoop like a boy.

"Then there's game afoot. Curse it all, Hugh, if you die to-morrow, you must live to-day. Ask no questions now, but follow me." And, spurring his horse, the earl put him at the hedge, cleared it and galloped up the hill.

Hugh followed, nothing loth, and they rapidly approached the trees. The field was extensive, the ground heavy, and the horses soon began to show signs of distress. Lord Tottenham pulled up.



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"They have had twenty miles of road. We must get down, and breathe them."

They dismounted and walked on leisurely. The figures they had seen had disappeared over the brow of the hill, but a brisk breeze was blowing from the trees, and now bore with it the sound of voices. Hugh could not distinguish any words, but Lord Tottenham, as became an old sportsman, had sharper ears.

"Listen!" he cried, speaking in an excited whisper. "What is that? Something is amiss. By Gad! this is an adventure. Give me your horse, and get you forward afoot. Hark! Run, boy, run—run—run!"

A sharp gust had brought words that could not be mistaken, and without reply Hugh threw the reins into his lordship's hand, and dashed madly up the hill.

"Sir, you are mad!" cried a voice—a woman's voice. "Stand back or I strike."

"Strike then, pretty one," replied another voice, in a tone that made Hugh clutch his riding-whip with a murderous grip. "For every blow I'll have a dozen kisses. We're alone, my sweet."

"Back! The whip is loaded."

The answer was a low, hoarse laugh. Then came the sound of a blow, a savage curse, and then Hugh reached the brow of the hill.

Twenty paces off, in a hollow of the ground, was a man with a girl in his arms, whom he held despite her frantic struggles as easily as if she were a baby. A whip lay on the ground, and from the man's forehead oozed a streak of blood. He was a long, gaunt personage, with a narrow, cadaverous face, sallow and unhealthy, his dress a clergyman's, considerably the worse for wear.

Neither the man nor his victim perceived Hugh, and the first hint the former received of the presence

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of a third person was the grip of strong fingers and a swinging blow on the crown from the butt of a heavy riding-stock. The shock of the blow and still more the surprise of the attack caused the ruffian to let the girl go, and stare stupidly at his assailant, who thereupon delivered a second blow, which, descending full upon his mouth, made havoc of lips and teeth. At this he gave a yell like a beast, and throwing forward a pair of long arms, caught Hugh by the throat.

The whip was useless now, and Hugh stood in danger of his life, for the man had fingers like an ape. They closed about Hugh's throat with a vicelike grip, and had they clinched, he would have been strangled before Lord Tottenham could have reached them. But Hugh coolly met the attack with two blows in the face so straight and heavy that the man's arms dropped, and, reeling back, he stumbled and fell on the ground.

The force of the blows and the fall cowed him, and he held up his hands for mercy, but no mercy was in Hugh's face. Winding the lash of his whip about the stock, he raised his hand to strike again. Before it could descend, however, a hand caught his arm, and the girl he had rescued had thrust herself between him and his enemy.

"Hold, I beg you! Hold, I say!"

Hugh stared in blank amazement. He had vaguely thought of this damsel as reposing somewhere on the ground, bathed in hysterical tears. But not at all. Though her face was flushed and quivering, and her hair dishevelled, she was perfectly self-possessed, and now assumed complete control of the situation.

"I pray you, stay your hand, sir," she said. "You have given him his deserts. Now let him go."

"Go, madam!" Hugh panted, trying to put her on

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one side without rudeness. "I have only just begun upon him."

The grasp on his arm tightened.

"Your pardon, sir," was the peremptory rejoinder. "He is my servant. Mr. Robert Young"—glancing over her shoulder at the man—"be off, this instant, and let me never see your face again. And mark me well, but for your cloth, this gentleman had rightly done his will upon you."

The person addressed needed no second bidding. Without a word of reply he sprang to his feet and fled down the hill.

Hugh was excessively angry, and forgot his manners.

"I have a mind to ride him down now," he cried. "He is no parson, but some villain counterfeit. This kindness is an encouragement to crime."

The girl laughed, a silvery, musical laugh, which, in spite of Hugh's anger, thrilled him strangely.

"My word, sir, if this is your kindness, what are you like, pray, when one puts you out of countenance? But, indeed—indeed—think me not ungrateful for your kindness," her face suddenly softening. "I know not how to express my thanks. Yet, of a truth, I could not have the man, be he what he may, killed before my eyes. Why, pardon me, this surely is the Earl of Tottenham."

His lordship had followed Hugh with extreme deliberation, and listened with great amusement to the dispute between the young people. Now he doffed his hat with a deep obeisance, as she went towards him with outstretched hand.

"A greeting, my lord. This is a great surprise, and a most pleasant one."

"A surprise, Mistress Isabel," he answered with

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a meaning glance at Hugh, "which you owe unto my friend. Allow me to present him. Mr. Hugh Montgomery—the Mistress Isabel Fretchville. Mr. Montgomery," the earl continued, still looking hard at Hugh, "detected you all the distance from the road, and would not be content till I gave permission to ride over. He is indeed something impetuous, as you may have heard and seen. But truly"—his voice deepening—"in this instance his over-quickness was a providential thing for you."

Mistress Isabel blushed rosy red.

"I am most obliged to your friend, my lord. But," forcing a laugh, "I would that any one I know rather than your lordship had seen me in this plight. I shall now never hear the last of it—never!"

Lord Tottenham shook his finger at her. "That will depend on your behaviour to me, mistress. At present I am so consumed with envy at this young gentleman I hardly know how to be civil to him. Would that my hand, and not his, had been your weapon of defence."

"A very feeble weapon," Hugh said ruefully. "I had hoped to have broken his back, or my whip upon it."

"That would have been cruelty," the young lady said. "Besides, my Lord of Tottenham will tell you, sir, when I am out of hearing, that this has served me right. And, indeed, I should not have trusted myself alone with such a man, though he did pretend to be a clergyman. I am forever forgetting," she sighed deeply, "that women are so weak."

"On my oath, then, mistress," cried Lord Tottenham laughing, "you deserve no consideration in the world."

They were now strolling slowly towards Hollywell



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House. Lord Tottenham had handed the horses over to Hugh, and walked beside the young lady, his hands behind his back, chatting as with an old friend. Hugh wondered much, and deeply, who this damsel could be. Clearly she must be a person of some consideration, for the earl, in a score of little ways, gave her that deference which men of his stamp never pay to their inferiors. But who was she and what . . . ? Never in his life had Hugh seen any one quite like Mistress Isabel Fretchville. A gray felt farmer's hat covered a head of wavy black hair, a pair of very bright brown eyes, rosy cheeks, and a mouth and chin as square as a man's. Flung over her shoulders was a rough cape, and beneath it a long, straight overcoat. Her skirts, of thick gray cloth, barely reached her ankles; and, most curious of all, she wore jack-boots to the knee. She was tall and slim, and might perhaps be handsome in feminine garments, but in this half masculine, and entirely unbecoming, dress she looked extremely strange.

Lord Tottenham perceived Hugh's bewilderment, and was vastly entertained by it; but presently took compassion on him.

"It was said in Thatchford, Hugh," he remarked in a pause of his conversation with Isabel, "that in all the country there was not a better husbandman than your mother. You and Mistress Isabel here should be akin. This estate of my Lord Marlborough's could not exist a day without her stewardship."

He said the last words with a comically wry face.

"It pleases your lordship to be in a sarcastic mood to-day," Isabel said with spirit. "What is my offence?"

"That you take me not seriously," he answered. "An occupation more becoming and grateful to a

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woman than your own no man could wish to see—at least no man of the stamp of this Reverend Robert Young.”

“You are so cruel, my lord, that I will appeal for succour to Mr. Montgomery. Sir, your opinion on a point. My Lord Tottenham would have women do nothing but work worsteds, nurse little dogs, and behave for all the world like those dancing dolls men pull with wires. Tell me, do you think that women should be dolls?”

Hugh did think so, at least it was his creed that women should in all ways be the opposite of men. But this pleading voice—for she was in earnest—the bright, inquiring eyes, appealing, demanding sympathy, were too much for all his principles.

“Indeed, I would see a woman do all that she has the will and power to do,” he said. “And I believe—nay, I know”—the thought of his mother came to him, and his voice became earnest—“there are women that are as strong as and far braver than some men.”

“Bravo!” cried Isabel joyfully. “My lord, hear you that? Why, sir, if you will believe it, Lord Tottenham thinks me a very monster because I earn a living by hard work, and labour with my brains as well as with my fingers. But if you, though a man, hold your opinion, I can afford to laugh. My lord, this is a glorious victory.”

“Why, yes,” he admitted, standing aside to let her pass. They were at the house, and a groom had taken the horses to the stable. “Or rather, I should say, your ladyship hath made a conquest, which is better still.”

Hugh frowned at the words, fearing what was to come. But the young lady only laughed, as if used to these sallies.

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"You shall not pluck away my laurels. Mr. Montgomery always speaks the truth, or his face belies him. Wait here, gentlemen, and I will find the countess and my lord."

She had ushered them into a large and handsome drawing-room overlooking the lawn and the road beyond, and now left them, whistling merrily as she went along the hall.

"She is my Lady Sarah's cousin once removed," Lord Tottenham said, answering a question in Hugh's face. "And, by Gad! as sweet a little piece as you will meet. But I see you know it."

Hugh tried to look critical. "Her dress is most uncouth," he began.

"Bah!" cried his lordship, "what of that? Doth not her face and form shine through? Wait till you see her in an evening gown. She has the arms, neck, and shoulders of a goddess, boy. And she likes you. But, 'pon my oath, you lied most scandalously. You dog, I believe, on my soul I do, that you are a very rake with women. Karl Brownker could not have beaten that one speech."

Hugh tried to look offended.

"I said what was partly true," he protested. But Lord Tottenham would not listen.

"You said what pleased her. Gad! do not gainsay it. I admire ye for y<sup>o</sup>ur art. Go on—go on. This afternoon you shall visit the estate with her alone. I doubt not she'll let you take her hand. She has no fear of men. I am most pleased at this. A man of your age, if he is cold when a girl smiles on him, should be shot."

A servant now entered with a tankard of ale and cut short the discussion. He said that my Lord Marlborough was out a-walking, but my lady would wait

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upon them presently. He had scarcely departed when they heard the rustle of a skirt, and thought the countess had arrived. It was, however, Mistress Isabel, bearing on her shoulders a blue-eyed, curly-headed youngster, about two years old. Hugh stared at her spell-bound. No longer was she in a man's hat and coat, but as a woman should be—most becomingly attired in the long, flowing dress of the period—a dress, alas, so soon to be eclipsed by hoops, quilted satins, and stiff brocades. She had left them a personage piquant but peculiar, she returned in all the glory and halo of a radiant womanhood. And Mistress Isabel knew it. Demure and well-bred as she appeared, with no trace of consciousness in her manner or her speech, there was a barely repressed sparkle in her brown eyes, and a suspicious dimple round her mouth which spoke volumes to Lord Tottenham. She did not look at Hugh, however, or appear to notice him.

“Charles has come to greet you, my lord.—Charley, say how d’ye do to the earl.”

But Charley was at the age when the intrusion of strange company upon his presence was an outrage to all his susceptibilities—what fond mothers call the “shy age.” Instead of holding out his hand, he turned his back on Lord Tottenham, and made inarticulate, but perfectly unmistakable, sounds of an inhospitable and extremely definite dislike. Isabel reproached him, but in vain. Then, all at once, after stealing a furtive glance at both gentlemen, he opened his arms to Hugh with a beaming smile and an emphatic exclamation of “Dadda.”

It was useless for Isabel to assure him that this was a case of mistaken identity. His only reply was to repeat the word with greater emphasis than before; and Hugh, being highly flattered by the attention, the



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small Turk was soon planted on his knee, examining with absorbed interest the enormous buttons of his riding-cape.

"A shameless rascal, on my word," exclaimed Lord Tottenham, keeping a sharp eye upon Isabel's face. "He turns from me to this puppy, who is near as young and foolish as himself, and flies from a lady's arms."

"The compliment to Mr. Montgomery is marvellous," said Isabel, smiling. "I have never before been so deserted."

At that moment, with one of those sudden impulses common to small children, the boy held out his arms to be taken back again. As Isabel caught him up he nestled his head in her neck, and held out one hand to grasp Hugh's, saying with infantile unction and complacency:

"Dad, dad; mum, mum, mum!"

"On my word," cried my lord, unaware that a door behind him had opened, and that a gentleman, coming in unannounced, was silently observing the group, "he hath united both of you in the bonds of—ahem—a life-long friendship. Be careful, Hugh. You have won his favour and his lady-love's; be sure, now, you do not forfeit it. Those whom Charles Churchill hates his fair mistress never trusts."

There was a movement at the door, and the new-comer came down to them. Lord Tottenham and Hugh turned, and the earl uttered an exclamation that is not to be found in any dictionary.

"Brownker!" he exclaimed. "You here!"

Mr. Brownker bowed and opened his lips to speak. His voice, however, was inaudible, for at sight of his face Master Charley, casting his arms desperately about Isabel's neck, lifted up his voice and howled.

## CHAPTER V

MR. BROWNER's appearance was a bolt from the blue. Even Lord Tottenham's self-possession failed him and he muttered strong words under his breath. As for Hugh, if a troop of French cavalry had appeared on the lawn, and he had been called on to surrender in the name of King Louis, he could not have been more taken aback. What Mr. Browner's own feelings were it was hard to discover. He saw the others before they perceived him, and his manner was the perfection of nonchalance and self-possession. Passing Lord Tottenham with a slight bow he greeted Isabel with an assumption of familiar friendship that made Hugh tingle all over.

"As an uninvited and unexpected guest," he said, making himself heard with difficulty, as Charley clinched both fists and screamed with passion, "I must expect a left-handed welcome. Your servant, Master Churchill."

"He deserves a sound whipping," Isabel exclaimed, extending her hand with a bright nod and smile. "Charley, who gave you that squeaking frog you love so dearly? You have no manners, sir, and no gratitude."

But Charley was not in the least ashamed of himself, and had at last to be borne away raging by a nurse.

"The day will come," Mr. Browner said prophet-

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ically, releasing Isabel's hand, which he had held in his distinctly longer than was at all necessary, "when that boy will be Prime Minister of England."

Isabel laughed.

"Because of his contempt for bribes?"

"On the contrary, because he never will refuse them, nor fail, when it suits his interest to turn his back upon the men who helped him into power."

"Indeed," said Isabel warmly, "I trust Charles will never be so great a knave as that."

"Then he'll not be a Prime Minister."

"If Mr. Brownker doth live long enough," Lord Tottenham said gaily (his lordship had now quite recovered himself), "I would not stake much on Charles's opportunities. Those two will be enemies for life."

"A life, my lord," and Mr. Brownker calmly bowed to Hugh, "sometimes lasts only for a day. Yet if mine last a hundred years"—he spoke now with a curious deliberation and distinctness—"so long as I possess the friendship of the Mistress Isabel, I shall be perfectly content."

Lord Tottenham's eyes grew wicked. This appearance of Karl Brownker had blown all his plans to the winds, and he was reckless of consequences.

"Faith!" he exclaimed cheerfully. "Mistress Isabel hath no lack of friends. She has made one more to-day—a friend in need."

Mr. Brownker started. The movement was very slight, but Lord Tottenham saw it and rejoiced. Isabel saw it too, and raised her head with a very becoming dignity.

"His lordship is right. Mr. Montgomery was in very truth a friend in need."

"You honour me too much, dear madam," Hugh

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said, looking straight into Mr. Brownker's eyes. "It was a very paltry service. But I will do my best to deserve the title yet."

"You should know the circumstances of it, Karl," Isabel went on, and at her familiar usage of the name it was Lord Tottenham's turn to start. "That Master Robert Young you commended to me as a chaplain to the men fell a-drinking yesterday, and had to be given his dismissal. This morning under a pretence of showing me the condition of the ten-acre field, he drew me far beyond the village, and then dared to lay hands upon me. But for Mr. Montgomery, who was passing with the earl, I should have been in a sorry plight. As it was, however, nothing happened. Nay, I tell you, nothing."

She said this rapidly and with emphasis. Mr. Brownker's face had paled to the lips.

"That devil dared to touch you," he said in a voice so tense with passion that even Lord Tottenham was startled. "That damned hound. Montgomery, you spared him not?"

"I did my best," Hugh muttered, "but——"

"He still lives, then. When I find him, which will not be long—not long, I will draw his blood from him in drops."

It is a ghastly sight to see a self-contained man lose all self-control. Isabel shuddered, and covered her face with her hand.

"Karl, be silent! Stop, I say, stop! I seem to hear the poor wretch groaning in his agony. I will not have him touched. Mr. Montgomery has already punished him severely. Let him alone. Your promise on it, here!"

She spoke in the arbitrary tone of one who could enforce obedience to her commands. Hugh and Lord



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Tottenham glanced at each other in mute dismay. Mr. Brownker's lips relaxed into a smile.

"I will promise to do naught that is not according to my custom. More I cannot promise. It was my fault, Isabel."

The fierceness had gone from his face. His voice was low and tender.

"Well said," exclaimed Lord Tottenham briskly, drawing the attention upon himself. He spoke to Brownker, but he looked at Hugh. Hugh's eyes were blazing, and his teeth were set. The sight of the man who had publicly slandered Marlborough calmly making himself at home in Marlborough's house was bad enough; but to see him making love to this fresh, sweet girl was maddening. Lord Tottenham saw this, and was afraid. At all risks he must prevent another explosion in this house.

"Well said," he repeated. "It is seldom a man has the honesty to blame himself. But rest easy, Master Brownker. Montgomery had the villain in his hands for ten good minutes, and Montgomery's hands, as you may know, are hard and heavy."

"I am glad," Mr. Brownker replied with a grim smile, "that Mr. Montgomery's hands have this time done him a service. The Mistress Isabel's favour, like that of most ladies, is to be won by a doughty deed."

"It is not to be lost, at least," she retorted with a sudden flush, "through a few words, as my dear Lord Marlborough lost the King's."

"That was a shameful and abominable act," Hugh cried. Such a remark in Mr. Brownker's presence was a suicidal one. But Hugh was not in the mood when a man measures his words. Isabel clapped her hands.

"I thank you, sir, from the bottom of my heart."

"Nonsense," exclaimed Lord Tottenham before

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Mr. Brownker could retort. "I will not have the favour of any king, even King William's, compared with Mistress Isabel's. His Majesty has many courtiers, no doubt, but all men are hers." He made an elaborate bow, and Isabel could scarcely keep her countenance. Such a high-flown compliment was extremely unlike Lord Tottenham.

"You shame us both, my lord," Mr. Brownker said, smiling. "Yet there is one point in common between King William's court and this. Men get their just deserts."

"Doubtless that is your opinion," rejoined the earl demurely. "The gossips say Mr. Brownker pays homage assiduously at both, and not without success."

It was a random shaft, and not in the best taste, but it went home to the feather, which was all my lord desired. He was fighting for his life, with his eye on Hugh's set face.

"Your gossips, my lord," Isabel retorted with spirit, "are wondrous witty at my expense, but they should tell the truth."

Lord Tottenham laughed, but did not trouble himself to reply. He had heard a well-remembered step in the hall, and knew that help had come. The words were scarcely out of Isabel's mouth when a servant threw open the door, and the mistress of the house entered at last.

Sarah, Countess of Marlborough, was in her thirty-second year; but her brilliant complexion, her vivacity, and small delicate features gave her the appearance of a girl of five-and-twenty. She was a great beauty, and far handsomer, Hugh thought, than any of her portraits. No picture, indeed, has done her justice, for her personality was so potent in everything she said, and looked, and did, that not even the greatest

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master could have painted that face as her friends knew it. A great beauty, yet one quality was lacking. No trace of gentleness was in her face. It was dazzling, polished, hard, as a cut diamond.

"My Lord Tottenham," she said in clear, rapid tones, with a peculiarly curt articulation, "a welcome to Hollywell. Mr. Brownker, you need none. This gentleman, Mr. Hugh Montgomery, shall receive one when I know him better. And now, my lord, to what do we owe the honour of your visit, pray?"

The words all came in a breath, as the gentlemen made their obeisance. An unconventional greeting enough, but highly characteristic. Sarah, Countess of Marlborough, usually said, without equivocation or disguise, exactly what she meant.

Lord Tottenham bowed low to hide a smile.

"My lord, your husband, madam, was good enough to ask me to ride down at any time, and since he did me such an honour——"

"Honour! Your pardon, my lord, that is not the word to use. Honour? Why, my husband, for daring to speak truth to his Majesty the King about his agents—I beg Mr. Brownker's pardon, I mean the Dutch-Englishmen who came with him from Holland, and are eating up our country like a swarm of rats—has been dismissed from office. There is an end of honour for the Earl of Marlborough."

"The Earl of Marlborough's favour, madam," rejoined Lord Tottenham, "must always be an honour to his friends."

The countess's face brightened. "Thank you, my lord, for that. It smacks of old times to hear such words from you. Now introduce to me this young friend of yours. A soldier, as I hear, and perhaps another honest man."

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Her ladyship was eying Hugh keenly all this time to his manifest discomposure.

"A friend of my lord's," Lord Tottenham said, "as he proved himself not so very long ago."

"What!" exclaimed the countess, "then he is the gentleman— But I must not betray him. I like your appearance, sir, and am sorry, truly sorry, you should be so wanting in wisdom of the world as you were last night."

Hugh gave a violent start, but he had yet to learn the Lady Sarah's little ways. The countess went on without a pause.

"A man who dares to defend the reputation of a fallen minister, sir, is foolish beyond sense. But a man who lays his life down for Lord Marlborough's good name—" Her voice softened now into an exquisite graciousness, and she made Hugh a curtsy such as only the Sovereign had ever received from her. "Mr. Montgomery, such a man, though he had been the poorest soldier in the army, shall be more honoured in this house than if he bore the proudest name in England."

"Gad, my boy!" cried Lord Tottenham, "not a man but would envy you for this."

"My lord, my lord!" cried the countess, her tone now one of stinging sarcasm. "You make a sad mistake. One man, at least, scorns Mr. Montgomery's simplicity with all his soul. Mr. Brownker here has been all things, and done all things, but I am sure he never was unwise."

Mr. Brownker bowed.

"If your ladyship commends me, then my conduct must be without reproach."

"Yet my Lord of Tottenham looks sceptical. I beg you prove me right, sir, and before this company say



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what you think of a man who, last night, at the St. James's Club, threw back with violence in some slanderer's teeth an insult 'gainst John, Earl of Marlborough. By what name should such conduct be distinguished, pray?"

Her ladyship smiled most sweetly as she spoke, and wound an affectionate arm round Isabel's waist, her golden head against the girl's dark one—a picture for a Raphael. Hugh watched Isabel anxiously, and saw a look of growing wonder in it. He breathed more freely. She, at least, had not heard about last night. Mr. Brownker, as usual, was imperturbable.

"Your ladyship honours my judgment too highly. The wisdom, or otherwise, of such an act as you describe depends on circumstances which you have not thought worthy of mention. But in my poor opinion, as such gallantry, or hardihood, could do your lord no good, and might be most inconvenient to the speaker, I should, in the words of the play"—Mr. Brownker made Hugh the politest of bows—"write him down an ass."

At this Lady Marlborough gave a laugh, but there was something in Hugh's face, though he was smiling too, that made her ladyship pause.

"Isabel," she cried sharply, "what aileth Charley boy? I found him in a pretty taking a minute since. Sally said he had been startled. I promised to box her ears soundly if I heard there was anything amiss."

"Alas!" said Mr. Brownker mournfully, "my ears, not Sally's, deserve punishment. Charley cried when I came in, as if I had been the ogre of the legend."

Lady Marlborough's eyes danced with mischief. She made him an elaborate mock curtsy.

"Your pardon, sir. In cultivating insight into

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character in my children, I forgot to teach them to conceal their wit."

Mr. Brownker shrugged his shoulders. "Most children, madam, I have noticed, imitate their elders."

"On my word, then, Isabel," exclaimed the countess, "you must have a care. But, sir, I pray you out of your abundant wisdom answer me another question. Why is it that while this maid Isabel hath, I believe, whipped, and coaxed, and prayed Charley on her knees to love you, yet he still cries at your name, and flies your presence as if it were the plague?"

Mr. Brownker made her a low obeisance.

"Because, Charley, madam, is your ladyship's son."

"A truth, a very truth," cried the countess with a laugh as gleeful as a girl's. "My life, sir, have a care, or your wit will make us friends."

"The dearest ambition of my life," Mr. Brownker said calmly. But her ladyship frowned and tapped the floor impatiently with her foot.

"I ask no man to foreswear himself, even for a jest."

"I can assure you, madam, I do not jest."

"Nor yet deceive any one." Hugh spoke quietly, but the words came like the first crack of thunder in a darkening sky. He had held himself in by main force so long as he was the subject of their talk, but Lord Tottenham saw that the elements would soon be let loose. The position was nearly desperate, for at Hugh's words, Lady Marlborough glanced from one gentleman to the other with a smile of mischievous anticipation.

Mr. Brownker's manner was urbanity itself.

"Indeed, I trust not," he said. "It is surely too

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early in the day for the brain of any gentleman to be confused."

"That is a strange remark," said the countess with the most innocent air in the world. "Pray be more particular. Confused? What mean you by confused?"

"The word contains a riddle, madam, which Mr. Montgomery can read you."

She turned wickedly to Hugh.

"Read it, sir, at once."

Hugh was white with passion, but he kept still, and his lip curled.

"I cannot, your ladyship. The answer is not to be given in speech."

"Nay, but I will have the answer. Is it in verse?"

"In the point of a sword, your ladyship."

"Enough, enough!" cried Lord Tottenham. "Be silent both of you!" He laid a heavy hand on Hugh's shoulder. "Faith," he said more lightly, "you youngers are like dogs in summer weather. You cannot meet but must be at one another's throats. This dispute must end."

"Hoity, toity, my lord!" cried the countess. "You take too much upon yourself. In this house free speech is as welcome as fresh air. Sakes! that a gentleman, now, a plain gentleman, should thus beard King William's agent. How I would that his master were by to hear it! So these gallants have quarrelled. Was it last night at the St. James's, I wonder? Master Montgomery, I shall now require you to give us a true and particular account of all that passed last night."

At these terrible words even Mr. Brownker looked startled. Hugh recoiled.

"Heaven forbid, madam," he exclaimed.

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"But I insist," she cried. "I am accustomed to obedience."

"That is impossible."

"Impossible? I do not know the word. Come, then, I will describe what I've been told. It is indeed a very interesting story, Isabel." Her ladyship paused to enjoy the consternation seen on every face. Whether she would have carried out her threat it is hard to say, but at this moment a gentleman, dressed in a plain country-made suit of gray cloth, came into the room, and Lord Tottenham uttered an exclamation of relief.

"Marlborough! On my soul, Jack, I was never so pleased to see you in my life."

"Not more than I, Ned, to find you here." And they shook hands heartily.

A striking contrast were the two friends. Lord Tottenham, broad-faced, deep-voiced, and burly, stood forth as a typical Englishman of his time. Something coarse and common-place in word and thought, yet true and open-natured. Prejudiced and narrow in his views, but with no doubts or scruples about life or politics. Ready to fight for his King and his religion without inquiring too closely where he might be led. Marlborough, how different! A man of lighter build than Tottenham, yet appearing taller by reason of his stately carriage. His complexion pale, his features fine rather than massive, but moulded with such symmetry that they formed a remarkable combination of beauty and of strength. A close study of the face revealed that the eyes, though set wide apart, were a thought too narrow for their length; while the mouth, of great sweetness when he smiled, was habitually set in an unchanging curve. This gave a curious stillness and immovability to the whole face, a quality which made



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his best friends, as well as his bitterest enemies, say it was a mask. Yet, when the lips moved and the eyes lit up, what charm there was—all that indescribable fascination of a disposition that, with all its faults, was ever thoughtful and considerate of others, and on occasion could be deeply sympathetic. Lord Marlborough had as few friends and as many enemies as fell to the lot of most public men of his day; but when men loved him or believed in him, his power over them was absolute.

He was, above all things, a born peacemaker, this great soldier, and at his coming now the flames of discord fanned by the countess died down to smouldering embers. Few men or women quarrelled openly in the presence of Lord Marlborough.

Hugh, indeed, forgot for the time being that such a person as Karl Brownker lived. He felt as a lover feels when seeing his betrothed after a long absence. His heart leaped with joy. He was face to face at last with the man he had worshipped for two years.

Standing motionless and erect—for he was a soldier still—he waited until Marlborough had given Mr. Brownker a friendly greeting, until Lord Tottenham had mentioned his own name and said something in an undertone, and he saw the beautiful eyes turn in his direction, and the still face break into a cordial, winning smile.

“Not a word, my lord,” Marlborough said. “Mr. Montgomery and I need no introduction.” Then, extending his hand: “Welcome, comrade, to our quarters, and may you find more ease, and, of a surety, more food, than when last we met before Kinsale.”

Hugh took the hand respectfully, but the kindly words had put him perfectly at ease.

“Where your lordship is in command,” he an-

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swered, "no soldier takes thought of what he gets to eat."

Marlborough looked pleased. He was very sensitive to praise. Leaning familiarly on Hugh's shoulder he turned to the countess.

"Your ladyship loves stories that are true. Here is one worth hearing. At the siege of Cork the Popish garrison made a sortie, and fell upon a regiment of ours. They were all brave men, but were taken by surprise, and fell back in confusion. In that regiment was a certain company that had its captain shot and its lieutenant wounded, and yet, in spite of all, gave not a foot. So stubbornly, indeed, did it hold together, thanks to the junior officer, that the regiment recovered its formation and beat back the enemy to the very gates. The man, my lady, to whom all this was due was Mr. Hugh Montgomery. I thank him now, in the King's name and my own."

"'T was well done," said her ladyship graciously, "though by what I hear through a messenger from town this morning, I am not surprised."

"Strange," muttered Mr. Brownker to Isabel; "all this happened nigh three months ago, yet has not been spoken of until to-day. But these things are remembered of a man only when he has a fortune."

He spoke in a low tone, but Lady Marlborough, who had remarkable good ears, heard the last words.

"A fortune!" she said over her shoulder; "indeed that can do little for a man with enemies. No fortune will save Mr. Montgomery, when, for his brave defence of my Lord Marlborough's good name, he is thrust through the heart to-morrow morning by your steel."

The words caused the sensation they were meant to do. Mr. Brownker's face became livid with sup-

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pressed anger. Hugh could have sunk into the ground. Isabel turned white as a sheet, and even Lord Tottenham's ready speech failed him. Only her ladyship, glancing from face to face, remained smilingly at ease. The silence was broken by Marlborough himself.

"Mr. Brownker, a report from town, to which her ladyship has given words, has reached me, coupling your name with Mr. Montgomery's and placing mine between. I call on you to say before us all that the tale is false."

"I have the honour of answering your lordship in the negative."

Marlborough slowly glanced from Mr. Brownker to Isabel.

"Then the matter must be arranged, or you enter not my doors again."

Mr. Brownker bowed.

"In that case I have no alternative. Mr. Montgomery escapes."

"If Mr. Brownker," Hugh retorted, "makes such apology to you, my lord, as I dictate, I will release him."

Marlborough smiled good-humouredly.

"Then a treaty shall be signed and sealed between you. That apology we will consider made. While as for Mr. Montgomery's reputation, I give him my word that any man who breathes upon it shall have the lie from me. Gentlemen, you parted last night in heat, but you meet as friends in this house, and must not part again until you have clasped hands. My Lord Tottenham and I will stand sponsors for your honour. I beg you both to lay me under this obligation."

He laid his right hand on Hugh's shoulder and his left on Mr. Brownker's, and smiled into both faces.

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Hugh was overcome at once.

"Your lordship conquers all," he said huskily. "Here is my hand."

But Mr. Brownker did not move an inch.

"Your lordship is not aware," he said, "that I was struck before a company."

Marlborough frowned.

"I knew not that. Mr. Montgomery, an apology is due——"

Hugh raised his head.

"I do not apologise, my lord, to a man who called you traitor."

At these words Isabel gave a convulsive start. Mr. Brownker showed his teeth.

"You distort my words," he said. "I only told you that was said."

"You affirmed the slander to be a fact."

"You dared me to repeat it, so I had no alternative. The Earl of Marlborough knows that, in my opinion, he is a noble and distinguished gentleman."

"Then you lied," cried Hugh fiercely.

Marlborough raised his hand.

"Silence!" he said sternly. Then, with a sigh: "This dispute is beyond my mending. You must meet, gentlemen; but I trust when you have lost a little blood, there will be a better understanding on both sides."

"Indeed, my lord," said Mr. Brownker, with a most amiable expression in his fathomless blue eyes, and every trace of resentment gone from his face, "if we do not to-morrow understand each other beyond all cavil, I assure your lordship the fault shall not be mine."



## CHAPTER VI

LORD TOTTENHAM and Hugh left Hollywell House early in the afternoon. Marlborough and the countess came out to see them mount, and her ladyship was good enough to invite Hugh to ride down to see them whenever he felt inclined. This flattered Hugh beyond measure. Yet he was not in good spirits.

Though constitutionally fearless, and able to face death as coolly as he would eat his dinner, the thought of crossing swords with a man in cold blood was new to Hugh's experience, and extremely unpleasant. In the excitement of the moment last night he had welcomed it, and the distractions of the day had kept all quiet reflection at arm's length. But now that these were all over, and the fatigue of the long ride was beginning to make itself felt, it was a different matter, and to Hugh's infinite disgust he found himself speculating sombrely upon the reputed skill of his opponent and Lord Tottenham's drastic criticism upon his own deficiencies of fence. Presently, however, another subject took possession of his mind and drove out all thoughts of himself.

Isabel Fretchville had called him a friend in need. The sense in which she used the term was retrospective, but it had occurred to Hugh that if he would honestly deserve the name, he must do more—more than she dreamed.

Isabel was clearly a dependent in the Marlborough

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household, and though a relative of Lady Sarah's, she worked, as other servants worked, for wages. In the eyes of the world, therefore, and of men of the world, she sat below the salt. Her dignity and spirit had won Lord Tottenham's respect, it was true, and, with the friendship of the Marlboroughs, would preserve her always from open insult, but there was another and more insidious danger, and when Hugh saw Karl Brownker press her hand and look tenderly into her eyes he felt convinced that a pitfall was yawning at her feet. Lord Tottenham, he perceived, was of the same opinion, but he knew, without asking the question, that though the earl would be sorry for the girl, he would never actively interfere. It was the creed of the day that women who allowed men to pay them attentions which could not be seriously meant, except in the worst possible sense, had only themselves to thank if there were a catastrophe.

With Hugh it was different. The struggle with the brute who had assaulted Isabel had enlisted in her behalf his hot blood and lusty manhood. Then the spirit of the girl, and her appeal for his sympathy, even more than her beauty and charm, had captivated his fancy; the loneliness of her position roused his chivalry. Alone with his thoughts now—Lord Tottenham, for once, being in a silent mood—the desire and determination to serve her, and protect her, took complete possession of Hugh's mind, and he laughed to scorn his fears of Karl Brownker's skill. If a man fighting for a woman's honour could not overcome a cold-blooded rake, defending his wretched life, it was a pity indeed! Hugh felt strong enough to kill a dozen Brownkers. All at once, in the very midst of his excitement, a sudden thought came, and chilled him. Supposing Isabel loved this man? It might, indeed,

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he argued that there was additional need, in that case, for short shrift if she were to be saved from dishonour. But Isabel was not a weak-minded, ignorant girl. She had character and a strong will. If she loved, the man must have given proofs that he was an honest wooer. This seemed unlikely, but it was possible; and the bare chance of it brought Hugh's castle-building tumbling about his ears. At this point, however, Lord Tottenham uttered an exclamation, and Hugh's reflections came to an end.

"Upon my life," cried his lordship, "I'm disappointed in that little minx, Isabel. She is as cold and unfeeling as a china doll."

Hugh stiffened visibly in his saddle.

"In what manner has the Mistress Isabel incurred your lordship's displeasure?"

"In what manner?" quoth the earl shortly. "In every manner that a woman can. She has set you two youngers by the ears, when you should have been making friends; and she held her peace and stared stonily before her when she might have aided me to calm the storm which her pretty face set raging."

"I take you not there, my lord," Hugh rejoined in the same icy tone as before, and which gave the choleric earl the strongest possible desire to knock him off his horse. "The storm began last night, and——"

"And—and—and," sputtered his lordship, "was begun by Mr. Brownker; forced on by Mr. Brownker, hatched from the beginning by Mr. Brownker, conceived, planned, and deliberately brought to a conclusion by Brownker. You knocked him down, d'ye say? Well, you did, and that was not his plan. But in all the rest you acted as his puppet. He desired to quarrel with you, and to kill you; he had that determination before he saw your face. All for a woman's

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sake. Does your high mightiness's wooden head take in the situation now?"

Hugh's face became very white, and he spoke with difficulty. "You mean that this man, fearing I might be his rival with the Mistress Isabel, came to my board last night with a deliberate intent to drag me to a duel?"

"Just that is my meaning," snapped my lord. "Marlborough spoke of you, it seems, some days since, and Brownker found you had been invited here. A curse, I say, on women—on all women!"

"Nay, sir," cried Hugh with spirit, "I think your lordship should say men."

"Pish! Men are fools, if you choose. Two fools, at least, are riding side by side this moment. But 'tis a woman fooled them. This confounded little slut——"

"My lord, do not use that term."

Lord Tottenham looked round, pulling his horse so sharply that he nearly brought him on his haunches. It was many years since any man had addressed him in such fashion, and none had done it twice. Yet he was not angry. He peered into Hugh's blazing eyes and flushed face with a provoking calmness.

"Bad—bad," he muttered, half to himself. "Worse than I could have conceived."

Hugh breathed hard. "Mistress Isabel deserves respect, my lord, and shall receive it—in my presence."

Lord Tottenham sighed deeply.

"Good Gad, and it hath come to this! Why, boy, that fellow holds this silly maid in the very hollow of his hand."

"Until to-morrow," Hugh said hoarsely. "Only till to-morrow."

Lord Tottenham bowed his head.



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"The Lord forgive me—may the Lord forgive me," he groaned. "I have indeed done wrong."

Then he raised himself in his saddle and looked round the dreary wintry landscape with a shudder, and began talking to himself.

"All is the very same as when your father and I rode to his death twenty years ago. Truly a curse hath been laid upon you Montgomerys, father and son, brother and sister, mother and child. Your Uncle Dan was struck with an apoplexy in his prime; your aunt, the Lady Susan, is like to come to the block for treason, a crazy Jacobite. Her daughter is worse, far worse; your mother, the best of all, was killed by a cruel disease at forty years of age; your father pinked at thirty by Lord Casterton; and now you, at twenty-one—oh, my God!"

He groaned again and went on drearily: "It was just such a day as this I rode with Ralf from Thatchford after he had parted from your mother. He spoke of you. The words come back to me as if I heard them now. 'Ned,' he cried in that quick way of his—you have it, with the very turn he used to give his head like a horse straining on the bit—'Ned,' says he, 'the boy!' Then he was silent a full minute. 'He will be your son,' he went on. 'She will make him that. For God's sake, keep him from all women until he is a man. They ruined me when I was seventeen, and so, when I saw Margaret at last, and loved her, it was all too late. When he loves, as a man loves, see that it is not too late.'"

Lord Tottenham rubbed his eyes with his gloved hand.

"They were the words of a dying man, and true. This woman, the first you have known—you love as a young bird loves the first ray of sunlight that warms

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his wings—and for your love you'll die, and I am the cause of it."

"With respect, my lord," Hugh replied steadily, "you are not the cause of it at all. What I have done has been of my own free will. You led me to her presence, true, and thereby saved her from mishap unspeakable. That is not a curse. As for to-morrow, wait till to-morrow comes." He drew a deep breath of fresh air into his lungs, tossed back his head, and smiled. "I have no fears. I am trying to do the right. Harm will not come of that. At least, this is my belief."

But Lord Tottenham sighed and shrugged his shoulders doubtfully. Then all at once he straightened himself in the saddle and pointed to the west.

"See, lad! d'ye see that?" he cried. "The sun is breaking from the clouds to shine on us before he sinks to rest. Gad! how different all things look below. The world is changed. An omen, as I live. You are right, and shame me." He doffed his hat reverently. "Nay, nay; men may prate when they should pray, and fight when they should kneel, but above them is a Power that holds the scales. God, not the devil, rules the world."

## CHAPTER VII

IN a far away corner of the grounds of Hollywell House, beyond the lawn, the flower garden, the orchard, and the bowling green—beyond, indeed, all parts frequented for any purpose whatever by members of the household, was a spot called the Nun's Walk. It was a gravelled path, moss-grown and neglected, running between tall arbor-vitæ hedges for some fifty yards. At the upper end was the garden wall; at the lower end a tangled impassable wood. There was a door in the garden wall, the entrance to the walk, but no servant on the place could have been induced to open that door, for it was said that the ghost of a murdered nun stood behind it day and night. No one knew who had murdered her, or why; or how a nun ever became an inhabitant of this strange little blind alley which had once been an avenue between two gardens since destroyed. But there was the tradition, and as the walk was of no value to the present owner of Hollywell House it was not worth any one's while to disprove the statement, or exorcise the ghost.

A still, eerie spot. On either side of the hedges a wood had grown up and become so dense from neglect that on the stormiest days scarcely a leaf stirred in the walk. No sound ever broke the silence there except the coo of the wood-pigeon in its season, the rustling tread of small wild creatures, or the drip, drip of the rain in wet weather.

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But the Nun's Walk, for all its solitariness—or rather because of it—had an inhabitant besides the ghost. Since Isabel Fretchville came to Hollywell two years ago, she had taken refuge here in her brief hours of leisure from the cares and problems of her busy life. In bygone days some former owner of Hollywell had cut down a tree and fashioned the trunk into a rude rustic seat. On this Isabel would sit, in summer weather, dreaming day dreams, listening to the movement of the woodland life about her, resting and refreshing an overworked body and mind. No one disturbed her. No one, indeed, except the Marlboroughs, knew where she went, so that the Walk became to her as a private apartment—a sanctuary at the door of which she left the world behind.

Three months before Karl Brownker had met Hugh Montgomery he had paid his first visit to Hollywell House. He came ostensibly to discuss questions of army reform privately with the earl by command of the King, in reality to lay the foundation for systematic espionage of the Marlborough household. In pursuit of this high business of the state he was inevitably brought into close contact with Isabel. He saw her the first night in evening dress in all the freshness and roundness of her youth. He saw her the next day at work, shrewd, concentrated, authoritative, mistress of herself and of her men, supreme in her department, holding her own there even against the countess. Lastly, having discovered her retreat, he presented himself on the third day in the Nun's Walk, and contrived before the end of a week to make himself completely at home there.

The gentle art of angling for women had, with fencing, been the pursuits of Karl Brownker's leisure hours since he was sixteen years old. He had been a



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successful fisherman—so much so that he was beginning to get tired of it, and had seriously thought of marriage, or at least of looking out for a lady with the necessary money and rank to make the yoke endurable. His own position was onerous and important enough, but was scarcely as lucrative as he could wish. William was a good master, but not a generous one. Karl, who knew his master's secrets, and could count upon his countenance and support against all comers, expected no liberality. His salary, as he knew, had to come out of William's privy purse, which was none too large for his Majesty's needs. Marriage on a sound financial basis with some English lady of high degree would be a wise and politic move. It would strengthen his position with the Government, and enable him to be independent of the King. In the midst of all this, however, came his meeting with Isabel.

Three months is not a long time, but many a heart has been won or lost in less. Karl and Isabel soon became friends, and as in those days young men and maids were allowed full liberty to pursue friendships or other attachments, and break them, without exciting remark so long as ordinary proprieties were preserved, they saw as much of each other as they wished to do, and saw each other alone.

Lord Tottenham and Hugh left Hollywell House at three o'clock in the afternoon, and at four Isabel, seated on the fallen tree, was digging the end of a stout walking-stick, shod with a tiny hoe, impatiently into the gravel and waiting for Mr. Brownker. He came with the air of a man in haste.

"As I live, dear," he said in a low tone, seating himself beside her, "I thought my lord would never let me go."

Isabel looked up with a frown of anxiety.

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"He is troubled and perplexed about public affairs."

"He may well be troubled, being in the posture of a climber who has essayed to scale a height and finds himself where he dare not proceed, and yet knows not how to draw back."

"Lord Marlborough," was the quick rejoinder, "can climb safely where other men would fall. I have no fears for him."

"You know not his position."

"I know that he has a good friend at court," and she looked at him significantly.

"One friend," rejoined Mr. Brownker complacently—he had just succeeded in bribing two of Lord Marlborough's servants to betray all their master's secrets to him—"one friend, perhaps, but many enemies. Yet, a pardon; we do not meet to-day to talk about my Lord of Marlborough."

"I ask you to save him according to your promise, Karl, and our friendship."

"And I ask you, dear one, to cease calling me a friend."

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. She did not draw it away, but as he would have slipped his other hand about her waist she straightened her arm and held him at a distance.

"Friendship, Karl, is all I have to give."

His hand dropped to his side and he rose, with a formal bow.

"Then I beg to take my leave."

She rose also, making no answer, but brushing from her skirt some shreds of moss. Then she slowly turned and looked him in the face.

"You wish to go?"

"My presence is an offence to you."

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She frowned at him. "You know it is not; why not tell the truth?"

Brownker laughed pleasantly. One of Isabel's peculiar charms in his eyes was her fearlessness. He who for three years had been the dread of every Jacobite in England, and could make even the lords of the Privy Council quail before his biting tongue, was no more feared by this slight girl than if he had been a fly.

"The truth, my dear, is this: we have been parted full two weeks, yet no sooner do I take your hand than I am thrust aside. Now, do I offend or do I not? If not—" He drew nearer to her.

"You ask me for more than I can give," she said, still at arm's length. "There is no question of offence."

"Ay, ay; you will let me love you, then?" He spoke half tenderly, yet with a steady undercurrent of passion in his voice. "Hunger for you, burn my heart out for you, and yet I must not so much as snatch a kiss or hold you for one brief moment in my arms?"

Isabel gave a little shiver.

"Certainly you must not. It is strange that you ask, knowing I have no feeling nor desire for such caresses. Why do you ask it, Karl?"

He looked at her fixedly a moment without answering. It was not the first time she had asked him such a question. Had any other woman he had known done so, his answer would have been sharp, conclusive, and to the point, for his creed concerning women admitted coquetry alone as a reason for such playing with fire. But Isabel was in earnest. Her question came in a precise and somewhat severe tone. She was still frowning slightly. Karl Brownker, accomplished in all the *galanteries* of the most select court circles, stood

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now, before this country miss, upon his trial. The position was, he knew, ridiculous. Yet he was so far from resenting it, that his only thought for the moment was how to retrace the step he had just taken.

"Why do I ask it?" he said slowly, "because I am weary of giving all, Isabel, and receiving nothing, because this compact of ours——"

She stopped him with a gesture.

"Nothing, you say. Then—my friendship is—nothing?"

She spoke quietly and judicially, but not without feeling. He caught both her hands and held them tightly.

"I have not said that; and if I felt it, child, I should not be here to-day."

"Then you doubt my friendship? I pray you let me go; you hurt my hands."

He kissed them, and obeyed.

"There is my answer, most exacting miss. But think you a lover will place cold friendship against the longing of his soul?"

Isabel looked at him wistfully.

"If I were only sure," she began, then paused.

He drew a sharp, deep breath.

"You doubt my love, Isabel. You are very ignorant of men."

"That is a truth," she replied calmly. "Though I have seen many, I have in reality known but one, and sometimes I am not sure that I know him."

"If you would but give him opportunity, and test his love, you would not say that."

Her eyes brightened.

"Opportunity—test—good words. Nay, not that again." He had seized her hands. "Let be, sir, or I go about my business."



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He dropped her hands with a shrug.

"A test," she went on in a thoughtful tone. "I have it in my mind to give you one."

He made her a very graceful bow.

"To gain your love, my dearest mistress, there is no test I'd flinch from."

Her brow clouded again.

"Stay. You would make a bargain? That is different. If I should promise this or that because you do such and such a thing, I am but requiring service for which I pay you wages. That is no test of love."

"A man who endures a test should rise in value by it, else what is the value of a test at all?"

"That I admit, if he makes no bargain."

"I make no bargain."

"Then, sir, you shall have your opportunity."

"Your majesty has only to command."

She laughed a happy, joyous little laugh, which pleased Mr. Brownker. All severity had vanished from her face. She looked a very woman now, a sweet and dainty woman. He longed to take her in his arms and kiss away all hesitations and reserves.

"You will then, sir, spare the life of Mr. Hugh Montgomery to-morrow, and become his friend."

There was a profound silence. After one sharp breath of surprise, Mr. Brownker turned away and began pushing hither and thither with the end of his cane a half-frozen field-mouse, which was hopping feebly across the path. Isabel watched him.

"You do not like this test."

He made no answer, but suddenly struck the field-mouse on the head.

Isabel gave a cry of anger and pity, and picked up the little creature—dead.

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"It harmed you not," she said in a choking voice.  
"A helpless mouse!"

"It was in my way," he said.

She smoothed the ruffled fur, and gently placed the body beneath the hedge.

"You kill all things in your way."

She spoke quietly, but he saw that her face was drawn, and the hand which held her dress a-tremble. He picked up two stones and brought them forcibly together. One was chipped by the shock, the other was broken to pieces. He held it out.

"Which of us do you wish to see like this?"

"Neither."

"Psha! one *must* break."

"That rests with you."

"I, the weaker, smaller man?"

"Ay, you, the duellist. Must I instruct Master Brownker in his trade?"

Her face was scornful now. He moved his feet impatiently, yet could not take his eyes away from hers.

"If I am to spare him, I must know the reason why."

"He has done nothing to deserve death."

"A woman's reason."

"His life is precious to his friends."

"Mistress Isabel, to wit."

She nodded. "Yes, for he did me a great service. I should grieve much were he to die."

He bowed, while an icy smile played round his lips a moment and then left them stern and hard.

"Of course you like not that," she went on. "I should have lied and said he was more indifferent to me than that mouse! And this is what men mean by love. Save me from it! Trouble yourself not with a denial—I read your resolution in your face."

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"I am glad," he said politely, "that you read my face."

She was trembling with strong feeling, her eyes were wet with tears. "Yet I had thought you were a friend, Karl."

"Pardon; I never did pretend to be your friend."

"A lover, then," she said sharply, "has less devotion than a friend. It is well to know."

"If Mr. Montgomery were your friend and not your lover, he should command my life."

"He my lover? You are beyond all patience, Karl."

"A very gallant lover, madam, with a fortune and the favour of your friends."

"I care nothing for him."

"He cares the world for you."

She shook her head with impatient incredulity, then paused as if a sudden thought had struck her.

"Well, if that be true, what then? Is that a sin deserving death?"

"It is unfortunate for him."

"This, then, is the measure of your love—to kill in cold blood a fellow-creature because he has been unfortunate enough to follow your example. Indeed, sir, you may take your leave, and welcome."

"I would but prove my love."

"By murder."

"You are unjust, Isabel, and insult me cruelly." He spoke no more with calm assurance. The words came hoarsely, brokenly. Isabel saw that he was in earnest, and listened in spite of herself. "A man who takes from another a paltry jewel or other property is hanged justly by law. Shall a thief that tries

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to steal what is more precious than any jewel escape?"

"I am no man's property!"

"One day, please God——"

"But wait, sir. That day has not come."

Mr. Brownker ground his teeth, but Isabel faced him steadily, though with less anger than before.

"There lies the point, Karl. I will not be treated as a piece of goods."

"You need protection."

"That may be, but I am thinking that it should be from Mr. Brownker—not the ward of the Earl of Tottenham."

He bit his lip. It might be fancy, but he thought he read shrewd warning in those words.

"You have known Mr. Montgomery one day," he remarked after a moment's pause. "A short time to pass judgment on a man."

"Not when he carries his nature in his face."

Mr. Brownker bowed gravely.

"Then indeed I must go home." He was very quiet now. All anger and bitterness had left his face. Isabel could not read its expression.

"Stay!" she said impulsively. "You are grievously at fault."

He bowed again and waited, but made no movement towards her.

"I do not, cannot, possibly, express myself aright," she went on hurriedly, "but I mean this: that gentleman, no doubt, hath faults. Indeed, I do not know him, but I am sure of this—he loves children and all helpless things. Though rude and hasty in his anger, if he did injustice to a man and knew it he would ask his pardon. That is why I like him, and would have you like him too."



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Mr. Brownker coughed. "And I, you think, am merciless. My nature is to kill."

He spoke sardonically, coldly; but Isabel thought she detected a very slight tremour in his voice.

"Yes," she said slowly, "you have proved it."

## CHAPTER VIII

THE morning broke raw, damp, and miserable. There had been a thaw in the night ; it was now threatening rain, and two gentlemen, who had ridden down to the most exposed part of a far-away stretch of grass and wasteland called the Hampstead fields, cursed the weather, the occasion that had dragged them from their beds, and the universe in general, with great vigour and impartiality. They were doctors, and each carried in his hand a long black bag containing bandages and a fine and various selection of instruments. But though they anathematized creation as became professional men who were obliged to watch a surgical operation performed by amateurs, they would not have missed the sight for the world.

There are duels and duels. Even in the seventeenth century the number of serious "affairs" was comparatively small, usually it did not do to kill your man. If he were of rank or position, a hasty departure to the Continent was necessary, with much undesirable notoriety and a heavy outlay of money before the matter could be forgotten ; while even if the victim were a person of no importance, ten to one but he had relatives or friends bearing a most inconvenient grudge against the arbitrament of the sword, and apt to seek out mean ways of revenge. Therefore, it was safer and much less troublesome to "wing," and not pink, your man. But there were other duels, when

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through some bitter personal feud or rivalry the world had of a sudden became too small to hold two men.

Such a duel these surgeons, who were both men closely connected with the fashionable world, knew was to be fought to-day.

"Well matched, eh?" remarked one, stamping his feet to warm them and looking earnestly to the south along the road to town—a lonely, muddy lane then, now the teeming thoroughfare of Chalk Farm Road. "A pretty equal match, they say."

He spoke gently, and rubbed his hands with a purring gesture. He was a round, apple-faced little man with an obsequious manner and a ready smile.

"No match at all," rejoined his companion curtly—a solemn, dry-faced gentleman with keen eyes. "My man stands not a chance against yours."

"Dear, dear," said the first in a distressed tone. "Poor fellow, poor fellow! I hoped *this* time we might be entertained."

"Karl Brownker seldom amuses any one but himself." And the speaker chuckled grimly.

"No, he hath no humour in these matters," was the pensive answer. "No playfulness at all. He bides his time, receiving not a scratch, and then strikes once, and all is over. I like a man such as my Lord Casterton used to be, who'd draw blood for blood's sake. I attended when he was killed by my Lord of Tottenham, and I assure ye it was a rare sight. The lungs were pierced and an artery divided by the one thrust, so that the blood streamed like a torrent."

"Hold!" interrupted his companion gruffly. "Here they come. Mark ye their faces! I may be mistaken, but I think that though my patient will be pinked for sure, you will not be disappointed of a little humour."

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"The Lord grant you are right," the other said with an engaging smile. "It goes against a man's conscience to be feed for doing nothing. I ofttimes wonder Brownker brings a surgeon on the field at all."

"It is the man's tenderness of conscience," was the grim reply. "He loves his enemies, and gives them every care when they are dead."

The principals now rode up with their seconds, and were received by the doctors with low bows. No words were spoken; and while the grooms led the horses away a short distance Hugh and Mr. Brownker divested themselves of their coats and waistcoats, while Lord Tottenham and Mr. Brownker's second chose the ground and measured it.

All this was done with the greatest despatch, lest by any untoward chance there should be an interruption by the officers of the law.

The sun was rising as the combatants took their places in loose white linen shirts and gartered hose.

They saluted each other and stood motionless until Lord Tottenham gave the signal. Then they stepped into position; exchanged thrusts of courtesy, and the fight began. Hugh, following the advice earnestly pressed upon him by his second, made the attack—an attack, Lord Tottenham quickly perceived, more formidable than Mr. Brownker anticipated, for Hugh's thrusts were well and steadily delivered, and his guard was of iron. Mr. Brownker's agility alone saved him from dire mishap. Two, three, four minutes passed, and still Hugh's attack continued unabated, while Mr. Brownker's quickness seemed taxed to the utmost to keep himself from harm, and such thrusts as he made in return were parried with ease. A spot of red appeared on his left shoulder. Hugh had drawn



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blood, and at the same moment Mr. Brownker gave ground a full two feet. But Lord Tottenham started nervously at this. It was an obvious stratagem, likely to prove fatal to Hugh's hot blood. He advanced, however, cautiously, and gave no chance, and Lord Tottenham breathed again. Great drops of perspiration stood on his lordship's brow. Had he been fighting himself, he would not have felt a greater strain on nerve and muscle. Yet the sensation uppermost in his mind was that of wonder and surprise. In his wildest moments of hope he had not dreamed Hugh would fence so well. His activity was great, his coolness perfect. Though there was no finish or grace about his style, and, compared with Karl Brownker, he was as a young lion facing a leopard, yet the lion's limbs were long and lithe, and his wrist was of steel. The fight was fiercer now, as it always must be after blood is drawn. The veins stood out on Hugh's forehead, his eyes glistened. Inch by inch he pressed his opponent back, and even the doctors held their breath. A lunge at the breast, another, and Mr. Brownker had the narrowest escape. Blood trickled from Hugh's under lip, where he was biting it, and Lord Tottenham looked grave. A third thrust, and a very deadly one. Mr. Brownker seemed to invite this, and it passed clean through his shirt, tearing a deep hole in the linen. But he was not touched, and before Hugh could recover himself, before Lord Tottenham could utter the cry of dismay that was in his throat, the point of Mr. Brownker's steel was buried in Hugh's arm above the elbow. The limb stiffened instantly and Hugh's sword dropped to the ground, while Lord Tottenham sprang forward and Mr. Brownker lowered his weapon. But before the seconds could come between them, Hugh had caught up his foil with the left hand.

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"Hold, sir!" cried Lord Tottenham furiously. "You are disabled. The fight must cease."

"With Mr. Brownker's favour, it has only just begun."

"Oh, that is as you please," was the polite answer, with a slightest suspicion of a sneer at the end of it.

"I say it is a mere trifle," Hugh said in a dogged tone, as Lord Tottenham called the surgeons, "and my left hand is stronger than my right."

The doctors pronounced the wound severe, but not such as to incapacitate Hugh, if he could fence left-handed. Lord Tottenham appealed to Mr. Brownker.

"You will refuse to fight a man you have disarmed. It is murder."

Mr. Brownker shrugged his shoulders.

"I cannot refuse, my lord, to give this young gentleman satisfaction if he desires it, but I will meet him on equal ground."

So saying, he took his foil in his left hand, and feeling the point with a finger of his right, resumed his position. There was nothing more to be said. The surgeon swiftly bandaged Hugh's arm to stop the bleeding, and the men faced one another again, left-handed.

"On guard!"

The signal came from Mr. Brownker's second, for Lord Tottenham could not speak. He was suffering tortures. His hopes had risen high. For one moment, even, he had thought Brownker might be overpowered, and he was bitterly disappointed when Hugh's sword fell; but it was a great relief to know that a fair and gallant fight had been fought out without dishonour or disaster. Now, after all, the worst had happened. With a devilish cunning Brownker had contrived that an opportunity should be pro-

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vided for the fight to cease, but of such a nature that Hugh would rather die than take it. Had he pinked Hugh in the first instance, ugly things might have been said—Lord Tottenham would have taken care of that. But he had disarmed him, then was ready to desist if asked; and finally took his foil in his left hand and thus stifled at once the imputation cast in his teeth by Lord Tottenham that he was taking advantage of a wounded man.

What now? To an ignorant observer it would have seemed as if the men were tired or had cooled down. But Lord Tottenham's heart sank as he watched Hugh's face. It was wan and haggard. Clearly he felt himself that there was no hope; that he was before a master of fence against whose skill and knowledge his own strength and nerve were useless. Yet he was fighting with a desperate coolness of the man who, while expecting death, is determined not to die alone. He ventured no more rash lunges, but he made the most of his length of arm and superior height, and waited and kept still. He was now an antagonist no man could afford to despise, and the doctors, who had feared when he was disarmed to see a swift and easy victory for Brownker, coughed and smiled. It was the most satisfactory encounter they had seen for years.

Several minutes passed, and neither combatant had gained advantage. In vain did Mr. Brownker leave himself open to attack, exposing his shoulder, his head, even his breast, in a most tempting manner. Hugh, having once tasted the fruits of that marvellous agility of his, was no more to be drawn. At length Mr. Brownker, feeling this, changed his tactics, and by almost imperceptible degrees he took the offensive. His thrusts, light and swift as the dart of a cobra's head, now pressed upon Hugh's guard, and with the

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least amount of apparent effort or movement, he drew closer—closer—while the perspiration streamed from Hugh's brow and his breath came heavily. He felt that the end was near now, and that the moment had come for one supreme effort. He gave no warning this time. A thrust of Mr. Brownker's came in, struck his adversary's right shoulder and tore it cruelly. Hugh, taking no notice of it, stepped forward steadily and aimed a full and deadly thrust at the breast. If the play of Mr. Brownker's foil had been like the cobra's stroke, this of Hugh's might be compared to a tiger's spring. It was all or nothing now, and he knew it. Careless of defence, he lunged with what force and weight there was in him, and in all Mr. Brownker's experience he was never quite so near to death. Even his agility could not save him, for they were too close, and had he been obliged to trust to that alone he would have died. But bodily quickness is only part of a duellist's equipment. While Hugh's nerves were strained almost to bursting, Brownker's were steady and as cold as ice. He met the thrust now as coolly as if a man had knocked against him in the street, only slightly changing his position, and the foil grazed his side and passed along his back. The next instant, with a lightning turn of the wrist, Brownker had thrust full at Hugh's breast, the point of his weapon entering an inch below the heart. Hugh's face turned deathly white. He staggered and then fell fainting into Lord Tottenham's arms.

"My boy! My own lad!" groaned the earl in a choking voice as he sprang forward. "Oh, my God! my God!"

He was shaking with emotion, and his hands trembled so that he could hardly tear away the linen



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to find the wound. He did so, however, before the surgeon reached the spot, examined it closely, and then turned slowly round with a face of utter bewilderment.

"May the Lord save us!" he cried thickly. "The thing is a mere scratch. It doth not even bleed."

Mr. Brownker bowed.

"That was more than I intended," he said coldly. "I did not mean to cut the skin."

He handed his foil to his second, while his surgeon stripped his right shoulder, which was bleeding fast. But now Hugh, whose faintness had been caused by nervous overstrain, came fully to himself. He had heard Brownker's words, comprehended what had happened, and could have died of shame. In every face except Lord Tottenham's he thought he saw contempt and derision. While Lord Tottenham, whose honest eyes were full of tears, muttered incoherent words of thankfulness, he ground his teeth, and when his surgeon would have led him away he thrust him aside and walked across to Brownker. Hugh was a ghastly sight. Blood had soaked through the bandage and streamed down his right arm, staining his shirt in great blotches. His left wrist had been gashed severely, and his face was covered with sweat and grime. He was unconscious of his hurts, however, unconscious of everything except that he would have been lying cold and pulseless on the grass but for the indulgence of the man he had tried with all his strength to kill.

"Sir," he said, standing before his former enemy, a dozen feelings tugging at his heart, "what reason had you to hold your hand? Why did you not thrust home?"

Mr. Brownker, who was in the busy fingers of his surgeon, turned slowly round.

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"Why should my reason, if I have one, interest you?"

"Because I cannot rest until I know it. You have never spared a man before, and I would have struck you dead. There, you have the truth."

Mr. Brownker nodded.

"Ay, that is certainly the truth. If you take lessons you will kill me the next time."

"I kill the man who has spared my life!"

Mr. Brownker shrugged his shoulders, and then winced with the pain the familiar gesture gave him.

"Pish! If I am a fool to-day, why should you be a fool another time?"

He smiled sardonically, and then their eyes met.

It was a supreme moment in their lives, though neither guessed it. While he spoke, Brownker was thinking that he was very tired and hungry, and that Hugh was a bore; Hugh, that he would give a thousand pounds to turn his back upon this man and never see him again. And yet when their eyes met a sudden thought flashed into the mind of each at the same moment.

Hugh was the first to speak.

"Sir, I have misjudged you. Can you forgive me now?"

And Brownker, who by reputation was the coldest-hearted and most self-centred man in King William's household—where there were few who knew what natural feeling meant except the feelings of the brute—Brownker at these words grasped Hugh's unwounded hand.

"Forgive an enemy? Nay, that I could not do. But I might try, as an experiment, what it is like to be friends."

## CHAPTER IX

A FULL and particular account of the duel was sent by Lord Tottenham to Hollywell House the following day, and Marlborough read it aloud to his wife and Isabel. At the end Lady Sarah threw up her hands in amazement.

"Sakes! Brownker spared him! It must have been by William's wish. Karl Brownker would never spare a life unless he had been bidden."

"Indeed, my dear soul," Marlborough said, looking at Isabel's flushed face, "I am much of your opinion; but it was not the King he talked with last evening in the Nun's Walk."

The countess laughed.

"I should have remembered. But what is this, what is this, then? That man does naught for naught. Child"—she frowned anxiously—"tell my lord and me, this instant, what reward you promised Master Brownker if he showed mercy?"

"My friendship, madam."

"Friendship, indeed! Try no such bite on me, you hussy. He has had that for long enough, with all its privileges."

"The privilege has been respected."

"That I believe, because you say it. But I will not believe he has failed to make a bargain for advance."

"No. The understanding was clear as words could make it."

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"Words—ha, ha! A woman who thinks to hold Karl Brownker by his word is a fool."

"I am fool enough," Isabel said coolly, rising and putting away her work, for it was her bedtime—eight o'clock—"to set more store by Mr. Brownker's word than your ladyship does."

"Then you are an impudent minx," the countess rejoined, pinching her ear, "and a greater fool than ever I imagined. But, in seriousness, mind where you tread. I have said a dozen times this man pursues you as a weasel hunts a rat. I call him weasel for he never trips himself in anything by overhaste; yet is ever at heel drawing nearer, nearer. My lord shakes his head, but I know that I am right; and mark me, whatever you may say, or think, or do, that knave, by sparing the life of Master Hugh Montgomery, is nearer his desires than he has been since first his black shadow crossed our threshold. To bed, and dream of rats!"

Isabel made a low courtesy.

"Your ladyship shall be obeyed. It's good luck, they say, to dream of rats."

"Impudence!" Lady Sarah cried, slapping the girl on both cheeks with pretence of great violence. "On my honour, if you do not mend your ways you shall pack. Begone, and a plague on you; and if Karl Brownker suits not your fancy, call up the other gentleman."

Isabel retired obediently to the door; but as she curtsied to Marlborough, who had opened it for her, she said over her shoulder with a mischievous face:

"Alack, madam, but then they might fight again, and over me!"

Then she fled, pursued by a last word from her ladyship, which need not be written down. But Isabel



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cared little for Lady Sarah's sharp words. They understood each other. Isabel knew her mistress well, and loved and served her faithfully.

All that was good and hopeful in Isabel's life she owed to the Countess of Marlborough, from the day—the never-to-be-forgotten day—when Lady Sarah paid a flying visit to a farm owned by Isabel's father, a poor squire, and saw a long-limbed girl of sixteen years old standing on a haystack ricking hay, and not only working herself with immense energy and muscular activity, but making all the farm hands round her work with a briskness rarely to be seen. This sight made so deep an impression upon the countess that she had carried off Isabel that very night, and had not parted with her since.

Isabel's father was Lady Sarah's cousin, but there was no love lost between them, which, indeed, was partly why her ladyship took his daughter from him. He was a sour, ill-natured man, and had married a wife of feeble constitution who had died when Isabel was a child. There were no other children, and the squire had taken much to drink. His house, therefore, was no place for a young girl growing fast into a beautiful womanhood. Lady Sarah did many a charitable act in her life, for, with all her hardness, she liked helping others, but never one that had more important consequences for herself than that adoption of Isabel Fretchville. In the Marlborough household, the girl's native energy, and the training she had received in her father's house, together with an innate love of children, made her an invaluable servant companion, mother's help, and housekeeper. She began by being all these things in turn and sometimes all at once. Finally, Marlborough's steward dying suddenly one day, the girl applied for the post, went on to the estate, and did

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so well that she was allowed to take the situation. Perhaps the fact that only half the wages were paid to her which would have been given to a man had something to do with Marlborough's strange choice of a manager; but it was that manager's ability and quickness in learning which enabled her to keep the place.

It was a curious position for any woman to be in in those days, and was possible only in such a household as the Countess of Marlborough's. But Lady Sarah, though tyrannical to a degree, always encouraged women who could hold their own, even while she would periodically abuse them; and Isabel, besides her other qualities, possessed that of a good temper, and, taking example by my lord himself, she pursued her way evenly and steadily, and with her patience weathered all the storms with her mistress, and, as a reward, was allowed an even greater freedom of action in her own private affairs than was customary at that time, though the lack of control in all households brought up under the court of Charles II. still generally prevailed.

One of the consequences of this freedom was the friendship with Karl Brownker. Though Lady Sarah was far too shrewd a woman of the world to fail to perceive the object of his attentions to her husband's paid servant and her own poor relation, she never interfered. She had given Isabel warning the first day—a warning which she repeated whenever Karl Brownker's name was mentioned—but beyond that she did nothing, and let him come and go as he chose. It was her creed that a woman who cannot take care of herself in such matters deserves what she gets. In her own young days, passed in the court of Charles II., Lady Sarah had been pursued by numbers of

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evil-minded men, yet had escaped without a scar. Isabel, she thought, could do the same.

Accustomed to the girl's spirit and fearlessness, she credited her with far greater knowledge of the world than she really possessed, for Isabel had not been brought up in fashionable society after the blessed Restoration, but had breathed all her life the fresh, pure air of the country. She was lonely, very lonely, and in her heart of hearts, growing with her womanhood, was a vague but irrepressible yearning for the friendship of men.

The roots of the plant had been struck in rich ground, the plant itself had grown quickly and was strong and full of life and vigour, and now the flower was in bud, ready to burst into bloom when it felt the heat of the sun.

## CHAPTER X

A WEEK had passed since the duel, nine days since Marlborough had been dismissed from court by the King. In London all was unrest. Men of every shade of politics were uneasy at this act of the King's. The courtiers, of course, and the bulk of the great Whig party, declared it was a righteous act, and that, if all were known, Marlborough deserved not only dismissal, but imprisonment and attainder. Public men did not mince their words in the seventeenth century.

Most of the Tories, on the other hand, were either furious or frightened, as their several positions dictated. But whatever might be their private feelings, they were too weak even to protest in public; while so afraid were they of being accused in a like manner and becoming marked as hostile to the King that scarcely one of them expressed a word of sympathy with their former comrade. Wherever Marlborough went he met with cold looks and averted eyes. Lord Tottenham, and a few intimates alone, grasped his hand as of old, and even these mostly did so where they could not be perceived by their friends.

But through all this turmoil, hearing whispers on every side that he might be at any moment apprehended by the King's messengers and thrown into the Tower, knowing that spies watched him when he walked abroad and filled his house in the country and in town, Marlborough went his way serene and smil-



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ing, answering cold greetings with dignified reserve, treating all innuendoes with contempt, preserving in private and in public, to his wife as much as towards his enemies, an unruffled countenance. His attitude was that of respectful surprise and reproach that he who had done so much and served his King so well should be treated so scurvily now; but he never failed to intimate that time must justify all that he had done and bring him into favour, and that through ill report as through good report he was ready at any moment to draw his sword, and give his life for the King and Queen to whom he had sworn allegiance on their coronation day.

What thoughts lay in his mind behind the unchanging calm of his firm, still face no one knew.

It was a bright, sunny afternoon in the first week in February—one of those afternoons that seem to breathe the coming spring. A bird twittered here and there in the trees and hedges of Hollywell; fresh blades of grass were springing on the long stretch of lawn before the house, and the earliest flowers were boldly showing their heads, taking no thought of the bitter blasts and nipping frosts to come in the near future. February and March had to run their course and spring was far away, but the sun shone; the air was soft and mild, and birds and flowers and men basked in its warmth and let the future take care of itself.

On the lawn, which sloped gently to the hedge that divided the Hollywell estate from the road, Marlborough and his wife were pacing up and down in quiet talk. Marlborough had returned from London the day before, and they had been discussing the news of the town. Public business, however, had not been Marlborough's sole occupation. He had seen Lord

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Tottenham on private matters, and had just now informed his wife what those matters were.

"My word! a great match for the child," Lady Sarah was saying with a smile that, for a moment, softened into loveliness the hard beauty of her face. "Sure, John, it is a really noble match. Ten thousand pounds a year and Ned Tottenham's money when he dies. Surely my puss was born with a golden spoon."

Marlborough made no answer, but took a pinch of snuff with a thoughtful face. The countess looked up quickly.

"You do not approve. Your reasons?"

"Fie, fie, my dear heart," he said deprecatingly. "Think you I would bar Isabel from such a stroke of fortune? It is a royal match."

"Nevertheless, it meets not with my Lord of Marlborough's approval. Your mind, and all your mind, or never say again you love me, sir."

Marlborough raised her hand to his lips. "Dearest soul of mine, I would die rather than keep a thought from you. I cannot conceive a better marriage for Isabel in respect of money; but Hugh Montgomery is not the only man she knows, and for our own sakes, at least, we should not be too hasty in giving a consent."

"All of which means that Karl Brownker holds a lien on the Earl of Marlborough. Chut! I have seen you growing towards him all this month past, and have sickened at the sight."

They were strolling now down the drive, and Lady Sarah picking up a tough green branch of oak, bent and broke it into pieces with her strong white fingers.

"Brownker!" she went on, Marlborough remaining silent. "What is this Brownker? The bastard brat of one of William's Dutch intimates by some

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abandoned Englishwoman. He was put to school in France among the Jesuits, brought up later among all the villainies of our Dutchman's court, polished later still by the vices of our own when William came here first, and then, returning to that Hague hog's pen, he became the finished rogue, the very Satan of a fellow, that we know to-day; and so this thing, my lord, you'd unite with Isabel!"

"Heaven forbid!" Marlborough exclaimed. "I would sooner put her in her grave. But dearest, though you are an admirable artist, one stroke is wanting to complete your picture—the stroke that will explain my motive well."

"I know of none to his credit."

"He is private counsellor and a devoted friend of his Majesty the King."

"You call him King," cried Sarah, clinching her teeth, "I call him a low Dutch hog; and this man scavenger of the garbage he feeds on—lies!"

"And the King's enemies, my dear, are Brownker's, and Brownker's the King's."

But Lady Sarah was in a passion. "I would not sacrifice Isabel's honour for the favour of a score of kings."

Marlborough flushed, and for once in his life spoke almost sharply to his wife. "Her honour, madam! It is as dear to me as your own. I had no such thought."

"Well, and if he propose marriage," she rejoined, "and by force or wile should compass it against your will?"

"Then, my sweet," Marlborough said slowly, with a face of steel, "our gracious King would lose his scavenger."

"You would kill the man!" she cried eagerly.

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Then her face changed. "No, no! I will not have you risk your life on such a one."

Marlborough smiled and pressed her hand. "There would be no risk for me. He has a pretty style, but we were taught to fence."

Lady Sarah gave an impatient sigh. "Then if you would kill him, I do not take your meaning in the least."

"I would kill him, I say, before he should harm our daughter. But at the present for my own purpose I would play with him."

"He will play with you, if you are not careful."

"Listen," Marlborough continued without noticing the remark. "The King has dismissed me, dearest—kicked me from his door like a dog. Why?"

"Why?" she cried, stamping in her rage, "why? Because the black abortion of a Dutch usurper hath spite upon his tongue always, and jealousy in his heart."

"And knowledge," Marlborough added softly.

The countess became suddenly still.

"Knowledge?" she said breathlessly, "knowledge of what?"

Marlborough looked round. They were on the drive now, near some stumps of laurel and rhododendron bushes. Before replying he put his arm through his wife's and drew her on to the lawn again, away from all places where a listener might be concealed.

"Tell me," Sarah cried, "all you know and mean."

"My soul, there are certain vile persons who pretend to have a commission from King James to approach all who might, in his Majesty's opinion, aid him to gain the throne. They entice a man to commit himself, and then, for money, they betray him to the agents of King William."



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"A man of this kind has been to you?"

"He has been to all—to Sunderland and Shrewsbury, Godolphin, even to Devonshire. He was an impudent fellow, and produced papers that were most convincing."

"What said you to him? Tell me every word."

Marlborough smiled. "I inquired after King James's health."

"No more?"

"My heart, think you I would say more to such a one as Robert Young?"

Lady Sarah started.

"That man a Jacobite agent?"

"Nay, a spy, my love, in Karl Brownker's pay."

"But you made him chaplain to the men. Why, you even let him dine once at our table."

Marlborough laughed.

"By the first expedient I discovered that he was no clergyman, and by the second that he had no manners."

"The insult to Isabel, then, was planned."

"Not the very least. Brownker made use of a bad tool, which he will now put upon the grindstone. I should not like to be Robert Young."

"I would serve Karl Brownker worse."

"I shall, perhaps, one day," Marlborough said softly. "But for the time I have against me two men whose match for villainy and determination it would be hard to find."

"Who would believe the word of such a one as Young?"

"It is not his word I fear, it is his wit. That rogue has uncommon wit. There is but one way to meet him. So long as my name is under cloud at court, we must not make an enemy of Brownker, and, more, we must,

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by restraint of Hugh Montgomery even to the point of discouraging his visits to this house, allow your scavenger to think we are leaving Isabel unguarded. He will attempt no violence, that is not his way ; and if I do not mistake, that child has already partly gauged with her keen woman's instinct the nature of the man. Now tell me your will, and whether you do not think with me that, for the present, we must put Ned Tottenham off."

A silence of some minutes followed. Lady Marlborough, though hasty and impulsive in small matters, thought out great questions thoroughly before she committed herself to an opinion on them, and few men could take a wider, surer grasp of facts than Marlborough's wife where the safety of her husband was in question. Presently she said in a cold, determined tone :

"If Brownker is to be thoroughly deceived, Hugh Montgomery must be put to the wall."

Marlborough shook his head.

"That is not possible."

"Nothing less will prevent Brownker from planning your ruin. He will make the most of your disgrace, which, like enough, is owing to his vile tongue. He will work with this and that until in some manner he gets you in his power. The child, you say, has spirit. Ay, and there in particular lies danger. Brownker is one to prize that most which eludes or defies him. Already his fancy for the child has become a passion, or he'd not have spared his rival."

"True enough ; but it was such folly that it shows desire has nearly turned his brain. There lies our opportunity. But we must not make an enemy of Montgomery."

"Pooh ! he does not count with me," Sarah said

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carelessly. "His regard for you is too tender, his nature too straightforward and simple for any disappointment to make him dangerous. I say, cut him off, and let Karl Brownker think it is to favour his designs. Then play with Brownker, now hot, now cold, until some chance lifts you into favour or until William dies—Lord grant the consumption in his face may kill him soon!—then crush the man as you would crush a fly. That is the only way."

But Marlborough shook his head a second time.

"I cannot dismiss Montgomery so summarily. He is a right good lad."

"Hoity toity!" exclaimed Lady Sarah impatiently. "There are scores as good as he. On my word, he irks me now; a very gadfly of a fellow, proposing marriage when he has seen the girl but once. Sakes! a red-hot blade—a very rake-hell! When I meet him next I will, I warrant, cool off his ardours."

The sound of hoofs in the road, the clash of an opening gate, and up the drive came a horseman, who when he saw the earl and countess raised his hat. It was Hugh himself.

Marlborough looked at his wife and smiled. Her ladyship did not smile.

Poor Hugh! he believed his troubles were all over now. Such confidence had he in the welcome they would give him that for the moment he forgot the pain of his half-healed wounds, the aching of his wearied limbs, the weight of his burning, throbbing brow.

In defiance of the doctor, Lord Tottenham, and his own common sense, he had ventured on this journey when he should have been in bed. Six days he had been there, for the wound in his right arm had become inflamed and given trouble—six days and six nights,

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all of which he had spent thinking and dreaming of Isabel.

He had fallen in love as only a man under twenty-one, who for the first time sees his ideal woman, can fall in love. Every moment of the day he thought of Isabel; every hour of the night in the fitful slumber his wounds allowed him he dreamed of Isabel. He babbled of her to himself, he talked of her eternally to Lord Tottenham, until the earl in desperation went to Marlborough. With curious lack of judgment he told Hugh he was going, and when he returned with an evasive, unsatisfactory reply, Hugh's cup was full. He said little, to Lord Tottenham's unspeakable relief, but the next day he horrified the earl by announcing his intended journey, and the day after he left his bed for the saddle, and rode twenty miles. By the time he reached St. Albans he was in a raging fever, and when at last his horse paced up the drive of Hollywell House he was trembling with weakness and aching in every limb. Revived by the sight of the Marlboroughs, however, he made his bow with a composed face.

"I have taken your ladyship at your word," he said, wondering why his voice sounded so hoarse and weak, as if it were another person's. "I trust that my visit is not ill-timed."

Lady Sarah received his salutation with a very slight inclination of the head.

"Why, indeed, sir, since you ask the question, truth to say it is," she replied with the smoothness of an icicle. "But, pray, have some refreshment on your journey. And then, if your horse is weary, there is an inn two miles along the road."

Hugh sat still and stared at her as one stunned. Then the blood rushed to his temples, and he made a deep obeisance.



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"There was only one refreshment I craved as the reward of my journey, and that was your ladyship's welcome. Since I am denied it I will return to London."

He struck his horse with his spur and wheeled about. But the animal being tired and hungry was not at all to his master's mind, and resisted restively. Meanwhile Sarah, pleased at Hugh's spirit, exclaimed more good-humouredly :

"Nay, be not so cruel to your horse. Dismount, sir, for his sake if not for ours, and let the poor beast have a mash."

Hugh tightened the rein.

"My horse thanks your ladyship, but he has earned no favour from you by carrying me here. Your servant, my lord, and I will never—never——"

He could not find the right word. His horse seemed all at once to have lost its balance, then to plunge into some great sea. There was a rushing in his eyes and a deadly sickness in his throat, and he lost all consciousness. When he came to himself he was on the grass, his head supported upon some one's knee. A hand was loosening his collar, and a cool breath of air was playing upon his forehead. But the comfort of this was broken by the sound of a hard, unsympathetic voice.

"Stuff and nonsense!" the countess said. "The man is only giddy with a little weariness. There is no need for fuss."

"There is need for every care," a voice answered—Marlborough's. "He must not suffer through neglect of ours. Pray, to the house, and order a bed to be prepared at once, and find Isabel—she has some gift in nursing—then send for a doctor instantly. Do not delay a moment. James and I will bring him in."

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Hugh now felt himself grasped firmly round the shoulders and knew that he was in Marlborough's arms. The giddiness returned and he lost consciousness again, but there was a happy smile upon his lips.

## CHAPTER XI

HUGH was very ill. The over-exertion of the ride from London inflamed his half-healed wounds; fever came on, and had not his constitution been of iron, and the doctor who attended him an exceptionally clever one, his impatience to see Isabel would have cost him his life. Lady Marlborough was responsible for the choice of a doctor. Her ladyship, thinking more of economy than of her visitor, sent for the cheapest practitioner she knew, with the result, luckily enough for Hugh, that one of the best physicians who failed to make his profession pay through a bad temper, and an atrocious habit of telling the truth unvarnished, took Hugh's case in hand.

Dr. James Burtup was a short, bandy-legged man with near-sighted eyes, a turn-up nose, and a great mane of harsh red hair. A disputatious, ungovernable man in general society, in the sick-room he never spoke at all, except to give curt orders to patient or nurse. Watchful, sphinx-like, he was full of resources when his patient grew worse, circumventing disease in the most unexpected ways, and sometimes, even in the worst cases, gaining the victory at the last moment by his obstinacy in refusing to give up hope until the pulse was still.

In Hugh's case he reversed all the customary treatment of his day by refusing to bleed his patient at all, though he was delirious. The Lady Sarah was so

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shocked that she threatened to turn him out neck and crop, and would have done it had not Isabel and the earl combined and kept her out of the sick-room altogether. Isabel and Doctor Burtup were great allies, and Burtup, making the most of his victory over the countess, who, not being allowed her own way washed her hands of the whole business, coolly installed Isabel as nurse and cook for the invalid.

The doctor himself was nurse-in-chief. He had few patients, and Hugh's condition was critical; so by the earl's invitation, prompted by Isabel, he took up his abode at Hollywell House and ruled it, so far as his patient was concerned, with a rod of iron.

Before many days had passed, an exodus took place from Hollywell. The Princess Anne, just then in delicate health, had sent post-haste for her "dear Mrs. Freeman," and Lady Sarah was obliged to depart forthwith to town. Marlborough followed on political business as soon as Hugh was out of danger, and thus, after all her ladyship's resolutions, the young people were brought together, and Hugh from the gates of death passed into a state of felicity and happiness which repaid him a thousand-fold for all that he had suffered.

The fever abated in a few days, but it left Hugh very weak, and Dr. Burtup sternly ordered him not to go out, nor to move hand or foot without his permission, declaring that if he violated any direction whatsoever he would be an ingrate, a monster of ingratitude. Dr. Burtup, if he did save a man's life, spared no pains to inform him of the fact. But it is to be feared that there were wheels within wheels here. Hugh, of course, was as guileless as all lovers are where every moment spent in their mistress's sight is worth a fortune. He was so touched at his doctor's



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solicitude that whereas when desperately ill he had feed him at the rate of five guineas a week, now that he was convalescent he offered him double the amount to continue a merely intermittent supervision, which, as it happened, included a bulletin to London when Lady Sarah sent to inquire. Dr. Burtnup, for his part, pocketed the fee, and bullied his patient to his heart's content, at the same time contriving that the patient's particular desires should be gratified as much as possible.

A month passed in this manner, and the servants and other members of the Hollywell household, who had not expected when Hugh was brought in against the will of her ladyship that he would stay a week, now began to wonder whether he would ever go away. Not that any of them wished it. Love has various effects on different temperaments. On Hugh's, at least in the present stage of affairs, it made him more friendly, more generous, more anxious to be friends with all the world than he had ever been, and the humblest servant in the house received some substantial token of his regard. As for the children, they worshipped him one and all.

In the mornings, when Isabel was on her rounds about the estate, he gathered the family round him and played games without end. Later, when he was better, and on some pretext or other contrived to be with Isabel, or to serve her, all day long, he still gave himself up to the children for an hour before their bedtime. Then there was blindman's-buff and hide-and-seek, and sometimes a dance when Madam Carrington, Marlborough's cousin, played for them. Isabel at first was not present at these entertainments, but the children, artfully prompted by Hugh, raised so vigorous a protest that she had to come, and so infectious

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was the frolic of the hour that she soon joined in it heart and soul, and more than once danced a minuet with Hugh.

Children are observant creatures, and Hugh was as transparent a lover as ever lived; and it presently became evident that they guessed much. Yet they were discreet. The *enfant terrible* is not half so gruesome a creature as he is painted, when he loves his victim. They watched, they saw, and they rejoiced—but they did not tell. Hugh scarcely perceived that he was found out, and Isabel, though more clear-sighted, blamed the servants for putting foolish notions into the little heads and took it as a joke. But with the children it was no joke. Even Charley, the two-year-old, caught the infection. When after games he rested on Hugh's knee he would never be content until Isabel sat beside him, and then would beam upon them like a small Cupid crowned with golden hair.

This state of things ended suddenly. One morning at breakfast a letter arrived from Lord Tottenham informing Hugh that he had just seen the countess, and that unless Hugh returned at once consequences too awful to write about would ensue. Hugh was in a mood to defy the countess and everybody on earth, for he was hopeful that day. But he refrained, for Lord Tottenham's sake, and presently confounded the family by announcing that he must return to London.

The intelligence was received with shrill protests from the older children, by Charley with woeful howls, by Madam Carrington with polite regrets, and by Isabel in silence. Hugh, while he pacified Charley with an immense lump of sugar, watched her face furtively and felt chilled and disappointed. It was serious

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enough, but there was no reflection in it of the pain which he knew was in his own.

Hugh was very sore at this. Not that he could have put his finger upon a single definite occasion on which Isabel had granted him any particular favour, but as a whole she had treated him with a confidence and, apparently, a real pleasure in his company, which, seeming to grow closer as the days went on, had warmed his spirit into a steady glow of hope. And now to be ready to part with him without even a word of sorrow! Why, a mere friend would do more than that.

They separated immediately after breakfast, Hugh to ride for the last time a colt he was breaking in for Isabel, Isabel to her work. Lord Marlborough's steward, however, did not find work come at all easily this morning, and after some vain efforts turned and fled from her men to take refuge in the Nun's Walk.

Isabel, also, had received a letter. It was from Karl Brownker to say that, having Lady Marlborough's kind permission, he was coming down to spend a few days at Hollywell House.

This letter, together with something in Hugh's face when he said that he was going away, made work impossible for Isabel to-day.

Isabel had never before seriously considered the possibility of falling in love with any one. Karl Brownker she had liked and liked still, but he had made no impression upon her heart. Hugh Montgomery she liked much better than Karl, and during the days when he lay dangerously ill, she had thought so much about him, and so earnestly hoped for his recovery, that more than once she asked herself whether it were possible she might some time care for him more than as a friend, but without finding any satisfactory

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answer to the question. When he became convalescent she told herself she must be careful, and for a little while she was careful. But this did not last. Accustomed to Karl Brownker's way, which was to be pointedly indifferent to every one but herself, her suspicions were disarmed by Hugh's attentions to the children and his genuine enjoyment of the family life. She had honestly believed it was this which kept him with them after he had recovered from his wounds.

But this morning her eyes had been opened by the look upon his face and the tone of his voice when he said that he must go away. He loved her after all; he must have loved her from the first. What had she done? What did she feel herself?

The garden gate clicked, and Isabel, rousing from her thoughts with a most undignified start, turned to see Hugh approaching her. He was pale, and avoided her eyes as he came towards her; but his lips were resolutely set, and a sure instinct told Isabel that the moment had arrived when she must tie a knot or cut her friendship with this man to pieces.

An absurd desire to run away seized her, and deprived her of the power of speech; and Hugh, who in a few stiff words had asked her if she could spare him a few moments, received for reply a curt nod, which in the condition he was in at the moment chilled him like iced water.

Without a word they strolled up and down the Nun's Walk for several minutes. Hugh had prepared a speech for the occasion full of grace and eloquence, but so far from being able to deliver it he found himself attacked by a craven dread of speaking at all. Before long, however, a reaction set in. Hope he had none, but though she might scoff, be angry, or simply give him a cold refusal, he must and would *know*.



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"Isabel!"

He had never called her by her bare Christian name before, and the sound of it struck upon her thoughts like the sudden clang of some deep-toned bell upon the ear on a still night.

"Isabel!" He caught the breath that had failed him once and made it do its duty by main force. "I cannot go away without asking you a question. I love you. Can you—do you—care the least for me?"

Roughly, jerkily were the words spoken, without grace or even manners, as manners went in those days; but they were eloquent enough to Isabel of the speaker's meaning. She looked up at him with a troubled face.

"I do not know." There was a curious appeal in the words, which if Hugh had been older would have warned him that he was on difficult ground. As it was they raised him to a pinnacle of hope.

"But that means you care," he cried, "my——"

"Stop!" she said decidedly. "I did not say that. I said I did not know."

Hugh came to the ground with a bump. "You care a little, and I may hope."

"I do not think you should. But we are great friends, are we not?" She was speaking hurriedly now, her eyes on the ground. "Why should we not continue—friends?"

Hugh's hands clinched.

"Friends!" he said rudely; "that is impossible. I love you. If you do not care, and can never care, we ought not to meet again."

"But I could not bear to think we should never meet again."

The words were out of her mouth almost before she knew they were on her lips. Hugh's eyes flashed.

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"That sounds different. I am too hasty; forgive me. You see, I have loved you so from that first day. Life was so dark without you that I could not stay even to get my wounds healed, but must come hither to see whether you had any thought of me; and now I have to go away again."

Isabel frowned and shook her head.

"You were foolish and wrong. You might have killed yourself."

He smiled.

"It would have been your fault."

"Mine! Oh, that is too bad."

She had become angry all at once, and his smile vanished.

"I never said one word," she cried, "to lead you to think that I thought anything."

Her vehemence puzzled him.

"Indeed, I meant nothing of that nature," he said humbly. "I meant only that I loved you so, and that life was of no worth without you. Isabel, my darling"—he caught her suddenly by both her hands—"hear me now. Since I came we have been every day together. You have been kind—so kind—and I thought happy, too. Is this a lie or not? If it is I will go away and never trouble you, though my heart is breaking. But if it is not—Isabel, Isabel, if it is not——"

He was drawing her towards him, tenderly, reverently, yet with a strength Isabel could not resist. What had come to her she knew not. She was indignant at his precipitation, startled, unwilling, and yet could not resist him. An overpowering weakness seized her. Only by the greatest effort she managed to say:

"Let me go; do let me go!"

It would have been a forlorn hope with most men.

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But Hugh, though quivering all over with the joy of possession, had not lost his self-control. Her words stabbed him like a knife.

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes!"

Her tone was firmer. He dropped her hands, and Isabel drew back with a sigh of relief.

"Thank you," she said simply, "you are good."

But Hugh did not look good nor feel it. "I am waiting to know," he muttered between his teeth, "if, after all, it is a lie."

She gave a queer, helpless laugh.

"No, it is not a lie."

At this he would have taken her hands a second time, but she put them behind her.

"Not that; you must not do that again."

He stared at her in bewilderment.

"Yet you love me?"

"Not as you love me."

He drew back with a stiff bow.

"I must then beg your pardon."

She shook her head.

"I should beg yours."

"Isabel!"

"No, I mean it. Oh, I can read what is in your mind. Either I should bid you go away, or yield wholly and—and be your wife. Is not that your mind?"

"If I am worthy?"

He was humble again, for hope was in his heart.

She nodded at him.

"You are more than worthy."

"Then, what? You would know me better first?"

She smiled a quaint little smile.

"I think I know you now."

He edged nearer to her.

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"Then nothing lies between us."

She stepped back.

"But, indeed, there is a great deal."

"I have proved I love you, and you?"

"I—I do not know." She sighed and sat down upon the log seat and leaned her chin upon her hands and stared at the ground.

"You may not understand," she went on, "but the life I live has made me different from other women. Do you understand?"

She put the question abruptly, without looking up.

"I do not understand."

Hugh's voice was cool and deliberate. If Isabel had seen his face she would have known that he was making up his mind with characteristic impulsiveness to a definite resolution. But she was not thinking of him at the moment.

"I did not expect you would," she rejoined. "No man would."

She was silent a moment, and then went on slowly:

"I do not want to marry. I love my work, and if I married I must give it up. I love my independence even more, and I could not give up my independence to be anybody's wife."

She spoke earnestly, even passionately; but it was to herself rather than to Hugh, and when he answered her she started, being hardly conscious that she had expressed her thought aloud.

"I understand now why you do not care."

His voice was steady and a little hard; something in its tone made her uneasy. "I beg you will forgive me," he went on, "for my impertinence."

"You have not been impertinent."

"You have made me feel so, and have so well answered me I have not another word to say."



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He raised his hat formally, and gave her a long, steady look; then, before Isabel realized what he was about, strode quickly away towards the house.

She rose and watched him as long as he was in sight, but he did not turn his head or pause. When the garden gate closed behind him she sat down again upon the log. At first her face was very serious, but gradually it brightened. A quaint smile lurked about the corners of her lips, and when at last she left her sanctuary at the sound of the dinner-bell there was a soft radiance in her eye, in her cheeks a bright, warm colour. She walked slowly though she was late, and lifted the latch of the garden door with unusual gentleness as if it were precious, closing it quietly behind her. As a consequence, good Dr. Burtnup, who was standing in the walk with his back to the gate, did not hear her approach.

When Isabel saw him her eyes gleamed with amusement, for the good man was busily counting some money, and chuckling and muttering to himself.

"Five, ten—a lad of discernment, on my faith. Fifteen, twenty, twenty-five—a gentleman, bred to the bone—to the bone, I say."

And then he saw Isabel's shadow in the grass and started violently. Isabel's face wore the calmness of unconscious innocence.

"I trust your patient will be in proper condition for his ride to London."

The doctor frowned. He had stuffed his guineas into his pocket, and now kept his hands there, standing with his feet apart and looking up sideways like some bird about to peck.

"Madam, I pray there may be no relapse; but I won't answer for it."

Isabel stared at the little man.

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"You have changed your opinion, then."

"That I never do—never—unless, after death, by an examination of the intestines——"

"What can be your meaning? You said the ride to-morrow would be a benefit."

"To-morrow, yes; to-day, no. And he has had no dinner, madam. He refused his dinner. He called for his horse and mounted, and is gone."

"Mr. Montgomery gone?"

Isabel's face expressed such amazement that Dr. Burtup, who had been very angry with her, began to hesitate.

"If you did not order him to go, it is my error, but I——"

"Indeed, you are in the greatest error."

Isabel fixed upon the doctor so withering a glare that a severe chill ran down his back.

"And you, sir," she went on before he could speak, "who have boasted of the implicit obedience of your patient for these four weeks past, have allowed him, though not fully recovered of his strength, to ride to London dinnerless. If harm follows I fear your error is like to cost you more than five-and-twenty pounds."

And with an air that would have done credit to the countess in her haughtiest mood, Isabel swept past the discomfited doctor into the house.

## CHAPTER XII

KARL BROWNER recovered from the ill effects of the duel much more quickly than Hugh, but constant attendance on the King kept him so continuously occupied that the coach drive to St. Albans—for Browner was extremely careful of himself—the day after Hugh returned to London was his first leisure time and the first opportunity he had to review his private affairs.

Browner felt hopeful about Isabel. He was satisfied that her attitude towards Montgomery before the duel had been purely friendly, and he reasoned that though they had been together since, if it took Karl Browner three months to make much impression, it would take so raw a youth as this more than four weeks to supplant him. Karl, in fact, took the ground men of his experience and condition usually take. Of the many women he had wooed before he met Isabel only one had rejected him, and she was at this present moment completely in his power. He was confident that, sooner or later, his present campaign would be as successful as the others. The only difference was that no affair had ever interested him so much. The rivalry of Hugh rather amused him than otherwise, since he had discovered that the Marlboroughs, in spite of Hugh's fortune, were not inclined to press him on Isabel as a suitor. For Hugh himself, Browner felt a genuine liking. This would not indeed prevent

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him from destroying Hugh's dearest hopes in any way that might prove necessary, but his proposal of friendship had been no mere form of empty words.

In such mood he arrived at St. Albans, but no sooner did he see Isabel than that mood rapidly changed. He perceived at her first greeting that something was amiss, and all the evening after his arrival, while they talked on indifferent subjects in the presence of Marlborough's cousin, he noted a score of little things. The result was a restless night.

The next morning at breakfast he suggested a walk, and, somewhat to his surprise, his request was readily granted. An hour later they were together as of old in the Nun's Walk. Yet all was different from what it used to be. The place seemed damp and dark and dreary. The sky above was overcast, and a bitter northwest wind was blowing beyond the trees. Everything looked withered and decayed—everything but Isabel. Dressed in her farmer's coat and thick woollen frock, she walked briskly, with cheeks flushed—perhaps by the wind, but certainly flushed—swinging her light hoe, her head erect, her face full of vigour and brightness, the picture of health and fresh, rosy youth. Neither the big felt hat, worn rather rakishly to-day, though quite by accident—Isabel's acquaintance with her mirror being an intermittent one—nor the farmer's coat could conceal the beauty of her face or the proportions of her slender figure. Brownker thought he had never seen her look more attractive; and as they took a turn up and down the Walk, he drank in the beauty and the freshness of her as some hungry spider from its hole looks upon a fly sunning itself just without the web. Then he set to work.

“Montgomery left you very suddenly, then,” he



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said, mentioning Hugh's name almost for the first time. "I am sorry."

He did not look directly at Isabel, but he saw her turn quickly and look at him.

"I am not sorry," she answered, and something in her tone made him bite his lips. "I think it was as well."

Brownker gave a quiet laugh. His face was perfectly composed, his voice under control. The campaign had begun.

"You have not then heard that we are friends?"

Isabel looked at him doubtfully.

"I have heard him say so."

"You may believe Mr. Montgomery's word. I assure you I never knew a man more worthy of your trust."

He spoke with conviction, and waited as if for her to assent. But she did not. He slowly turned his head and looked into her face.

"I repeat to you, Isabel, this man is worthy. Do you doubt him?"

"I never thought of doubting him!"

The words were spoken coldly, almost impatiently.

For the second time Brownker bit his lip, and this time he made it bleed; but there was no change in his voice or manner.

"I am glad," he said. "I feared I might have prejudiced your mind against him a month ago."

He was looking at her intently, but she did not notice it, for when she looked back his eyes were turned away.

"You could not do that," Isabel replied in a curiously quiet tone. "I knew Mr. Montgomery before you spoke of him, and I have known him much better since, Karl."

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The word came like an exclamation, for she stopped in her walk.

"Karl, do you remember what we said when we were last together here?"

"I remember all we said."

"I told you that you were my friend, and you said you could not be my friend."

Her face was scarlet now, but full of determination. She spoke fast and earnestly.

"And then I replied to you that I——"

"Would put me to the test."

"I did not mean that."

"But I mean it. I stood the test."

He spoke firmly, though with a smile. Isabel's face grew pained and sorrowful.

"You did, Karl, nobly," she said in a low voice.

She had turned away, and did not see an ugly gleam which, shooting through his eyes like a flash of electricity, left them dull and dead.

"If you can say as much," he said very softly, "I am rewarded to the full."

"I say more," she cried, lifting her head. "Your magnanimity has made me feel that I am unjust in what I said. Indeed, I should have written to ask your pardon but that I knew we should meet soon. I ask your pardon now for saying that you were merciless."

"Pardon, Isabel? Nay, it is I who should ask pardon."

She looked at him in genuine surprise.

"I do not understand in the least."

He took her hand. At this movement she shrank back, but he would not let her go.

"Nay, I am your friend," he said, grasping her fingers so tightly that he hurt her. "That privilege you gave me, and I will not yield it up. As a friend,

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then, I ask pardon for slighting Hugh Montgomery, and wish you both God-speed and happiness."

He spoke slowly and distinctly, the grip upon her fingers tightening with every word until she could have cried out with the pain, if his last words had not made her unconscious of any pain.

"What do you mean?"

She was pale, angry, and her eyes met his unflinchingly. But his face did not change a muscle.

"As the wife of Hugh Montgomery you will be very happy."

"You have been strangely misinformed."

She spoke quite coolly, even contemptuously, but her face crimsoned, nevertheless. He very slightly shook his head and released her hand.

"I have my evidence first-hand."

"He told you!" Isabel's eyes flashed fire. "He dared to tell you this?"

Browner shrugged his shoulders.

"Do not, I pray you, ask me to betray my friend."

"It is a lie!"

"Nay, call it a mistake of mine," he said smoothly.

"But I crave pardon. It is no mistake. Your face belies your words."

His voice was as soft and insinuating as the cooing of a ring-dove. But Isabel was in no mood for such treatment. Her face was white as marble and as hard. Her eyes shone like cold steel. She dug her hoe into the ground, and pulled it out and held it in both hands, her head thrown back, her attitude that of defiance and determination.

"If you disbelieve my word you are no friend of mine. I have never given Mr. Montgomery the least right to say that I would be his wife. He asked me, I

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refused. That is the true account of it. If he has told you——”

“I have not seen him.” Brownker spoke sharply and decidedly.

Isabel looked at him in dumb amazement.

“But you said, I know you said——” she began brokenly.

“I said that I had my evidence first-hand, true; but I have not seen Montgomery. If he has told any one—he may have done—he has not told me. Nay”——as Isabel was about to speak again——“I pray you, no questions. I will answer none, for what I was told was true.”

Isabel gave a despairing laugh.

“Indeed, this is a pretty jest. I am to marry a man I have refused to marry because somebody unknown has said that I am going to marry him. My faith, if the poor man had any hope in his mind when he left me, which as he left me it is evident he had not, that hope will like have gone now, so——”

“No, it will not go.” Brownker spoke abruptly, sternly. “He will hold as close as any leech. If my congratulations seem out of place it is only because they are a little premature. This is a lovers’ quarrel.” He sighed, and went on hurriedly: “Forgive me, I am not myself. But my friend’s victory is my defeat. He has conquered, and will conquer, and I must go. Ah, well! so much for the good word of the Earl of Marlborough.”

He turned as if to leave her, but under his eyelids he watched the effect of his words like some gunner who has fired a shot at long range.

“Wait!” Isabel said sharply. “You have seen the earl about me?”

“Without his leave,” Brownker answered, sighing, “do you think I could come here?”



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"And the earl said—what?"

Brownker considered. He had to decide what it was likely that Marlborough would say.

"He would press no choice on you," he said at last, "but did not think you would marry any man without consent from him."

Isabel's face softened.

"Indeed, that is my lord in every word. And he is right. He has been, with her ladyship; the best friend that I have known; the kindest master, the wisest counsellor. No, I would marry no man in the world of whom they disapproved."

Brownker's face sensibly brightened.

"A wise and most proper resolution. Then," thoughtfully, "Mr. Montgomery had better pay his suit to Marlborough."

"Neither Mr. Montgomery nor any other will have a prospect of success if Lord Marlborough be not won. But, Karl, this is all most foolish and absurd. Mr. Montgomery, I tell you, has gone away. He is not likely to return. Let us change the subject. I pray you, change the subject now."

"With all alacrity. But tell me: if Montgomery or another were to win such favour from Lord Marlborough that he should beseech you to consider such a suit as worthy, I understand you would not spurn the suit?"

Isabel looked at him keenly.

"You are very curious about this. I am not going to marry any one."

"Unless my lord commands."

"He would not do that."

"But if he did, should you defy and disobey him, and refuse Montgomery?"

Isabel dropped her eyes.

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"There is nothing, even though it concerned my happiness, I could refuse Lord Marlborough."

Brownker raised his head with a long, deep breath.

"It grows damp and very chill," he said; "let us go in."

## CHAPTER XIII

KARL BROWNER remained three days at Hollywell. When he took leave he declared himself greatly refreshed by his visit, and he looked it. He had eaten well and slept well after the first night, and was apparently in the best of humours. Isabel enjoyed the visit more than she had expected. Karl was livelier and wittier than usual; a most delightful companion. Not once did he attempt to overstep the bounds of friendship, or again allude to Hugh Montgomery or any other equivocal subject.

Isabel herself was very kind to Browner, with the kindness a woman shows towards the man who was once her dearest friend, but who through uncontrollable circumstances has forever lost that place.

Karl felt this, and if the many women he had deserted could have known what the knowledge cost him they would have rejoiced. But for that very reason it hardened his resolution as the blows of a hammer harden iron. Before this time the pursuit of Isabel had been the occupation of his leisure hours, absorbing enough then in all conscience, but always set aside when he entered his office or the presence of the King. From this day forth, until the end came, it was the chief thought and purpose of his life.

Karl reached his house in St. James's late in the afternoon, and, taking a hasty meal, set to work to clear up the arrears of correspondence and other mat-

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ters which had accumulated in his absence. It was a large house in a fashionable street and full of people, yet Brownker was a bachelor. Who the other inhabitants were, it is, perhaps, not well to inquire too closely. All of them, men and women, had nearly as many different ways of dressing and disguising themselves as there are days in the year, and every one of them, old or young, obeyed Karl Brownker's nod.

Hour after hour Brownker worked. One after another his intelligencers slipped into the room where two clerks sat writing for dear life, made their reports, received instructions, bowed, and retired. Brownker loved his work, and gave himself to it heart and soul. In his papers, which no one saw but his master, were the secrets of the greatest families in England. Between dusk and dawn of every night in the year came informers and intelligencers with wares of every description, from the man of quality bursting with an important political plot, to the kitchen-wench discharged from her place, and eager to take revenge upon her mistress by disclosing some disgraceful family secret.

Only the more important informations were dealt with by Brownker in person. For the smaller matters he had a staff of men specially trained by himself. His house was known everywhere. No one with genuine intelligence to give of the King's enemies left there unrewarded. But woe to the unlucky wight who thought to make capital out of false information. Sooner or later Brownker always found him out, upon which condign punishment followed, not the less painful and severe because it was usually inflicted without the knowledge or assistance of the law.

The work went on until Brownker's clerks were



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fainting with fatigue and want of food, and even Brownker himself was weary. At last he touched a bell, and presently a servant entered to announce that supper was in readiness. Brownker turned to his clerks.

"You will sleep here to-night," he said. "There is a raging storm outside."

The clerks, who lived in the poorer quarters of the town, and like most of their class dreaded a wetting above all things, were extremely grateful. Brownker received their thanks with a gracious smile.

"To-morrow," he said, "we will resume at seven of the clock precisely, and continue without pause until your work is done."

When alone in his private rooms, Brownker piled up his plate with food, and then drew a letter from his pocket and read it slowly while he munched. It was a letter from Robert Young.

"The impudence of this knave," Brownker said to himself, "is beyond belief. Surely there never lived such a genius in roguery. But I must pay him first!"

He read the letter twice, and then, leaving his supper half eaten, began to walk slowly up and down the room in deep thought. After a short interval he would recollect that he was hungry, and sit down and eat. But he soon forgot his food again and fell into the abstraction of a man whose brain is working like the hands of a clever craftsman—creating, preparing, carving into shape some complete plan and scheme of action.

He rang his bell at last, and signed to the servant to clear the table.

"Chinnic," he said to the man, "you first brought me Robert Young. Read this." And he tossed the man the letter.

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Chinnic was a slight, tall, thin-faced valet, who had been so many years with Brownker that he had grown a good deal like him. The similarity between them was strengthened by the fact that the valet wore his master's cast-off clothes.

Chinnic perused the note with a wooden face, and nodded.

"He will be here, sir."

"You take your oath?"

"I know him."

Brownker frowned.

"Ah! so you said before. Yet, but for a chance, he would have done mischief at St. Albans that could not be repaired."

The man shrugged his shoulders exactly like his master.

"I said I knew Young, sir. I did not say I knew the Mistress Isabel."

Brownker did not answer. His brows were knit in thought.

"Has he the skill in forging handwriting that he pretends to?"

"None like him ever lived for that, sir."

Again Brownker thought, while his servant stood and waited.

"Then, my good Chinnic, we will try again. But this time your person shall be hostage for his good behaviour."

The man smiled sardonically.

"If he outwits your honour and me, I will stand to any consequence you name."

"Then bring him here at six of the clock to-morrow morning, and call me half an hour before."

The man bowed and moved slowly to the door.

"Stay!" Brownker said, and the man stopped.

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"Is it true that the knave has letters such as he pretends?"

"Ay—but they are all counterfeits."

"Worth nothing."

"Your honour's pardon. Not the Lords of Marlborough and Salisbury themselves could say the writing was not theirs. It has been tried."

"Hum!" Brownker stroked his chin. "If that be true, let him not be late."

He undressed quickly, and was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. As he drowsed off he muttered:

"My Lord of Marlborough, you shall have one more opportunity which this man shall provide—an invaluable rogue."

Chinnic was punctual to the minute the next morning, and Brownker rose briskly.

The bed-chamber opened out of the sitting-room, and as Karl put the last touches to his toilet he heard the sound of steps outside his door and the whisper of voices. A moment later Chinnic entered to find his master handling his rapier.

"Bring me the oil-stone," Brownker said without looking round, "and then remove all things from here which might be spoiled."

Chinnic brought the required articles, and Brownker, turning up his sleeves, sharpened the point of his rapier until it was as keen as a stiletto. Meanwhile the active valet had swept all the ornaments and small pieces of furniture into an inner room.

Brownker nodded approval.

"You will send him in, and, locking the door, stand behind it until I give you word."

Chinnic's face relaxed into a gentle, happy smile.

"He will ask a hundred pounds, sir, before he

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will render up the association he says he has discovered."

"In ten minutes," Brownker rejoined, carelessly feeling the point of his rapier, "he will render up the universe if I require it, and pay me a hundred pounds. Go!"

The servant slipped out, while his master, locking the door of the inner room and dropping the key in his pocket, quietly sat down upon his bed, the rapier lying concealed in the folds of the quilt beside him.

He had barely time to do this before Mr. Robert Young made his appearance, saluting his host with a bow and a patronizing wave of the hand.

"A greeting, sir. Faith, but this honour toucheth my heart"—looking slowly round the room. Then he paused and coughed, having caught a glimpse of the steel upon the bed—"but I was sure, to a plumb, that my past services and the facilities I could offer for the discovery of great matters would blot out and obliterate from your generous mind any remembrance of—ahem!—slight indiscretions. The flesh, good Master Brownker, even with the agents of the King such as ourselves, is frail—is frail!"

He gave a low, impudent laugh, and rubbed his great hands. Still in clergyman's dress, his favourite disguise, with a clean, irreproachable white band over his rusty black, Mr. Robert Young was, nevertheless, a gruesome object. His figure was lank and awkward. He had sloping shoulders and a very long neck, which, when taken with his bright, ever-shifting, beady eyes, an immense hooked nose, huge hands, and swarthy complexion, gave him a strange resemblance to a human vulture. The other features of his face were coarse and large, and his lips full, pendulous, and moist.



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His movements, partly through nervousness, partly through a constitutional irritability of temperament, were extremely restless, and added much to his likeness to a bird of prey.

All the time the man was speaking Brownker watched him in silence, neither by word nor gesture acknowledging his greeting. Karl's face was dark and impenetrable; his eyes fixed, dull, and expressionless as a snake's.

"And now, most gracious sir," Mr. Young concluded sharply, "I await commands."

His voice shook in spite of himself. The stony gaze of the man, who, truth to tell, he feared more than any other, the suspicious bareness of the room, and that glitter of cold steel on the bed began to affect his nerves very painfully, and dried up the stream of his eloquence.

Yet for fully another minute Mr. Brownker neither spoke nor moved. Then slowly, stealthily, he raised the rapier-point.

"You are welcome," he said gravely. "The juncture is most critical, and the time a very jealous one."

While speaking he rose, inch by inch as it were, from the bed, like a waking cobra loosening its coils. The rapier was now clearly pointed in Mr. Robert Young's direction.

Young laughed aloud and his manner changed. The restlessness and uneasy movement of hands and fingers ceased. He saw the danger that was coming to him, and bracing himself to meet it, he stood still and rigid, as watchful and as dangerous as his host.

"Jealous and critical indeed, i' faith," he said. "But his Majesty possessing subjects such as me, who

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have, I do assure you on my honour, found out a nest——”

“His Majesty, sir, in my poor person, thanks you. But, as it happens, he has found out you. Still now, or I slit you ear to ear.”

He stepped quickly forward, and with the point of his rapier pricked Young in the cheek. The man quivered all over and made a slight convulsive movement with his fingers, but it was not from fear. His face was horrible to look at, such ferocity and rage were in it. His eyes were as green as a tiger's; his nostrils widely distended, his lips parted in a grin which showed every tooth to the gum. Yet he kept still, while the blood from the cut inflicted by the foil trickled down his cheek and stained the white bands below. Another movement of Mr. Brownker's wrist and the lobe of the left ear was pierced and slit to ribbons. At this the man gnashed his teeth, jerked back his head, and tried to grapple with his enemy; but quick as thought Brownker slipped aside and stood on guard. To close with him now would have been to run upon a sword-point. Young saw this, and, turning swiftly, seized the handle of the door and shook it violently. But the lock would not yield, and, receiving a wound from Brownker's rapier in the other ear from behind, he turned again, and, reckless in his pain, charged full at his tormentor. He might as well have tried to catch an eel. His hands only closed on steel which cut him severely and then slipped from their grasp. If he came nearer, the deadly point gleamed in his eyes, or touched his throat ominously. After several vain attempts he fell groaning on the bed, his hands, face, and neck covered with smarting wounds. His spirit of resistance seemed broken now. He crouched on the bed, breathing heavily.

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"What have I done?" he whined. "I served you faithfully; secured information above price, and offer more, and my reward is torture."

"The punishment a brute beast deserves."

"Deserves!" he whimpered. "Why, my master, my dear, gracious sir, what have I done to deserve anything but thanks?"

He rose from the bed, and staggered a step or two towards Brownker with outstretched hands and an expression of helpless bewilderment.

Brownker eyed him with a curling lip.

"Lie to me and I will flay you. All this, as you know, is for your attempted outrage on the Mistress Isabel Fretchville. I swore to have your blood drop by drop, and now I am keeping my oath."

The man drew himself stiffly together, and pointed a raised hand to heaven.

"May the Lord destroy my soul for ever if such purpose ever came into my mind. May I rot in——"

Brownker stamped his foot, and made a pass with the rapier that caused the wretched creature to spring backward.

"Another lie and I will cut your tongue out! I say I swore to bleed you as they bleed calves—to death. But I am inclined to show mercy now, if you make it worth my while."

"I will swear," the man cried, "before my Maker——"

"And before the House of Lords——"

Brownker spoke very quietly, but for the first time he lowered his rapier.

"Before the King himself!" Young said solemnly.

"What do you know, then?"

"That there is a damnable plot against the life of

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her Majesty the Queen, concerted by the Earl of Marlborough and others."

"I shall want proof."

"I can procure perfect proof."

"Before you leave this room."

The man fumbled in his pockets, and pulled out a large piece of folded paper.

"There is a true copy of an association signed by the earl's own hand, my Lord the Bishop of Rochester, my Lord of Salisbury."

Brownker took the paper, and began to read. The man watched him with hungry eyes. He had taken out a handkerchief and was stanching the wounds, which, now that Brownker was preoccupied, it was evident did not trouble him so much as he had pretended. Brownker read the document through to the end, then shook his head.

"How can such a paper profit me?"

"Did the Earl of Marlborough know your honour knew of it, he would be as humble a servant of your honour's as myself."

"And what if the original of this is a counterfeit—what then?"

"What! a counterfeit? Why, I can swear——"

"Silence!" He advanced his rapier again, and the man started back to the wall. "Once for all," Brownker said slowly, "I know you, Robert Young. Listen to me. I will put your precious paper to the test—and you. But if either plays me false not all the devils from the pit shall keep you from my punishment—and my punishments are rare."

He cut the man again across the back of the hand, and Young's teeth closed with a hiss.

"I say, listen," Brownker continued. "You will write a note to the person who has the original of this



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paper—to bring it hither. When it is in my hand I will release you, and pay you twenty pounds; this, on condition that the instant I require to see you, you come at my bidding.”

He lowered the point of his rapier as he spoke and leant upon it with both hands.

Young sighed. He felt safe at last. Up to this moment he had not been sure that Brownker was not playing with him.

“I am at your honour’s full commands. But, indeed, it is impossible for any one to get that paper but myself. It lies at this instant in a flower-pot in my Lord Bishop of Rochester’s house, at Bromley. Release me now, and it shall be in your hands by ten o’clock to-night.”

“Here?”

The man coughed.

“Ahem! To tell truth—and I dare not tell less to your honour—I am too well known in these parts. If your honour could meet me eastwards in the city?” His voice became soft and purring, and he rubbed his hands. “I am so afraid a messenger might take me on a warrant and search me, and then ’twould all be blown upon and the secret known to all.”

While Young spoke Brownker observed him with an expression that had something of approval in it.

“I see you are careful in your work. Yet I should be rash to part with you did I not know every haunt and hole that you ever crawl to. Where shall we meet?”

“The ‘Black Bull,’ your honour, off Cheapside. ’Tis a convenient house.”

“A damned, low, ruffianly house.”

Young coughed again—deprecatingly.

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"Indeed, it is something rude; and if your honour is afraid to venture to the place——"

"All places are the same to me," was the careless reply. "I know the 'Black Bull.' At ten to-night." He knocked at the door and Chinnic opened it. "At ten to-night, Chinnic," he repeated, "I meet your honest friend at the 'Black Bull,' off Cheapside. I trust, Mr. Young, you have no trick in view." He spoke with a gentle, winning courtesy.

Young looked genuinely astonished.

"I have not seen a man in all my life so bold as to play one on your honour."

"Some have tried."

"I do not know any one, upon my word," and he purred humbly with downcast eyes.

"That is possible, for they are all dead."

The man shuddered, or pretended to shudder.

"Has your honour done?"

Brownker nodded, and in an instant Mr. Robert Young had vanished, and could be heard swiftly descending the stairs.

Chinnic looked at the door and then at his master.

"Sir—your pardon. But do you venture alone to that thieves' haunt?"

Brownker thrust his rapier in its sheath.

"I do propose, certainly, to renew acquaintance with Mr. Young alone at ten of the clock to-night. About your business, Chinnic."

## CHAPTER XIV

AT three o'clock in the afternoon of the day of Karl Brownker's interview with Mr. Robert Young, two gentlemen were discussing a bottle of wine in a private room at the St. James's Club. It was a meeting by appointment made by the Earl of Tottenham with Marlborough.

"Faith, Jack," his lordship was saying, "the fact is, the boy is harder to hold than an unbroke colt. And I sympathize, by Gad, I do! When I was young, whether it was on business of my own or a matter of the state, I never could abide suspense."

He tossed off a bumper of wine, and smacked his lips while Marlborough raised his glass and sipped a thimbleful.

"If all men were like you, Ned, how fast the world would go! But there are so few like you."

"Humph!" grunted the other, "a polite Jack Marlborough way of telling me to wait and be damned. But see here, friend"—Lord Tottenham brought his hand down upon the table with a sounding thwack—"I cannot wait, nor can my boy, without a reason."

"There are many reasons," Marlborough began.

"Oh, I doubt it not, my lord," the other interposed with extreme dryness. "A round dozen—nay, a score, if I chose to listen to them. I know you—I know you. A question in your hand is twisted this way and turned that, until by the time you let it go,

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Hey, presto! it has become quite another question. Now my question shall not be treated so. I shall want a reason that will stand. Gad's life! Jack, is there a squire's daughter in the land who should be allowed to snap her fingers at ten thousand a year?"

"She has, then, snapped her fingers?"

"Pshaw! I believe she'd drop into his arms if you were to nod your head."

"My head might be in danger, Ned." Marlborough had taken up his glass again, but he laid it down without touching it. Lord Tottenham's face fell, and then his brows contracted.

"The truth is, my lord, you have a preference for another man."

"There is another man."

"And that—Karl Brownker. 'Fore Gad, when the Earl of Marlborough can slight the ward of his oldest friend to pander to a damned Dutch mongrel, the times are in a sad confusion."

Marlborough drummed a devil's tattoo on the table with the fingers of his right hand with an unchanging face.

"Confusion—yes. In all my life, and I have had my share of life, I have never known such confusion as at the present time. But you mistake me, Ned."

He rose from the table. His eyes were shining now, and his voice was deep and impressive.

"Before I would let this King's agent do wrong to Isabel, I would be drawn and quartered."

Lord Tottenham heaved a great sigh of relief.

"Forgive me, Jack," he cried impulsively, and held out his hand. But Marlborough did not seem to see it.

"You have touched me in a very tender spot. But I must endure it. My tongue is tied."



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He spoke slowly and mournfully, with a dignity that awed Lord Tottenham, who hastily drew back his hand.

"If I have misjudged ye, Jack, and missed the meaning of your words," he said humbly, "it is because my mind is but a narrow one and interested only in one matter. Yet will I say one thing"—he raised his voice again a little—"it does surprise me that a man whose wife is dearest friend to a princess of the blood—who himself hath rendered well-known services, and been rewarded in some measure—should be so tender with this Brownker, who would not thrust his long nose twice within my doors without a danger of having it tweaked off. 'Fore Gad! it doth surprise us all—that's flat."

Marlborough smiled—smiled with an air of quiet, unutterable scorn, which, though flavoured with enough good-humoured pity to prevent it from being offensive, was infinitely crushing, and made Lord Tottenham feel as limp as a school-boy who had dared to argue with his master.

"So the babble of the coffee-houses and the scandal of the clubs has poisoned you, old friend. Well-a-day, well-a-day!" and he took out his snuff-box. Yet his fingers were so numb that when he took a pinch it dropped from them. Lord Tottenham winced.

"Come, come, pick your words, Jack. Gad, I said surprise; I did not say suspicion. If there are rumours, whispers—even threats and accusations—they come not from your friends."

"Yet my friends—my oldest friends—shun me in public; cross the road when I advance to meet them, and would hire a coach to ride in all day long rather than walk the length of half a street beside me. Come,

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Ned, you know what every one thinks and most people say. Be not mealy-mouthed."

"If I did credit a half of what they say, Jack," Lord Tottenham replied gruffly, "you would not, I do assure you, find me mealy-mouthed."

Marlborough brushed away with a handkerchief the snuff which had fallen on his waistcoat, and closed the box before he spoke again.

"They call me traitor," he said lightly, "and say that I am in league with James to cast William from the throne. Is not that so?"

"Yes."

"I do not wonder at it, Ned."

"You don't wonder—why?" Lord Tottenham spoke quickly, breathlessly. A careless observer watching the two men would have taken him to be the suspected man: Marlborough, the judge.

"Why? Because after what, for my sorrow, I ventured to say to my master's face, it is not wonderful that his agents say this and even more behind my back."

Lord Tottenham's eyes dilated.

"What *you* said? Gad, Jack, you bearded William. Come—tell me what you said."

Marlborough nodded; but before he spoke he went to the door and looked out into the passage.

"It will not have escaped your notice, Ned, that there are a few—an increasing few—gentlemen, voyaging from Holland to this country."

"Oh, Gad take the blasted Dutchmen!"

"All the services," Marlborough continued, "and public offices have suffered by it. But the army most of all. A soldier commanding an expedition risks life, honour, reputation, and holds in his hands the lives and honour of his men. In all armies but our own, the

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man who bears the burden and gains victory, wins the laurel. But with us, Englishmen serve and bleed and die, while Dutchmen get the credit and the pelf. It was this I told the King. I warned him humbly of the risks he ran, and the injustice of it. His answer was—dismissal. It is the usual reward of a courtier who tells the truth.”

“It was cursed cruel,” exclaimed Lord Tottenham. Then he gave a laugh.

“Zooks! but I’d give something to have seen his face when you, the most smooth-tongued of them all, dropped in your bullets of cold lead. It was a right manly, noble piece of work. By Gad! Jack, you deserve the thanks of all. But”—he paused, coughed, rubbed his head, and poured out another glass of wine—“but even yet I do not understand it all.”

“What don’t you understand?”

“This—that men, notably Karl Brownker, should dare to say in public you have corresponded with King James.”

“It is the business of the agent of the King,” Marlborough replied coldly, “to blacken my reputation everywhere.”

Lord Tottenham bit his lip.

“And yours, it seems, to favour him at the expense of your best friends. A strange thing, by my faith! Damned strange.”

“A man who has for an enemy the King of England, Ned, must do strange things.”

Lord Tottenham grunted, and began to walk up and down the room.

“You mean?—oh, curse it!—I see now what you mean. Jack—” He paused suddenly in front of Marlborough, who was leaning negligently against the

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chimney-piece, watching his companion under his eyelids.

"Jack, dost wish to hear words from my heart, however rough, or no?"

"So long as I hold your heart, Ned, I do not mind rough words."

"Oh, I love you! If you were to bolt to France and fight for Louis I should love you still. For you have a heart—a warm heart. But there's a devilish cold calculating brain a-top of it. That is why none—not even I—can fathom your designs. But here's my words: I know Karl Brownker. He has agents of his own in every camp, spies in every house. Your soul may be as white and spotless as—as my boy's, but this man I'll take an oath has a bolt within his hand that, unless you round upon him, will crush you. I feel it—in the air, in the buzzing of men's tongues, in the looks of all who know you. Good Gad! Jack, rouse and tear him down. Call upon this devil and all the rest to prove their words or take them back at the sword-point. Do this and quickly, or, upon your soul, you'll break my heart."

His voice trembled at the end, his lined face worked with emotion, he held out both his hands. Marlborough grasped them, and wrung them hard and smiled affectionately. But for once even the winning smile did not convince his friend, while the coldness of the hands chilled him to the bone.

"At the right time, Ned, I will do all. But believe me or believe me not, that time has not come yet."

Lord Tottenham groaned helplessly, and took up his hat.

"Go your way, then, go your way. And I must tell my boy—what?"



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"To wait. Not to despair, but wait."

"It is a hard thing to wait when one is young, Jack, and in love."

"Yet there is a harder thing than that, Ned." Lord Tottenham had reached the door. He turned, his hand on the lock. "A man who waits for love to come to him," Marlborough went on, "has hope in life. A man who waits for hate to strike him down has but to face despair."

"But you," exclaimed Lord Tottenham, "are innocent. You have the right upon your side."

"All that is true, old friend." The reply came in Marlborough's quietest tones. "But I am not the first man wrongfully accused who has had to face despair."

## CHAPTER XV

WHEN Lord Tottenham left the room, Marlborough returned to the table, and sitting down rested his head on his hands. All the calmness and the confidence with which he faced his friend and the world had vanished. His brow was furrowed with deep lines; his eyes cavernous, the lines of the whole face sharp and haggard. It became all at once the face of a hunted man. He took out a letter, glanced over it, and thrust it in the fire. Then he consulted his watch, went to the door, and, without opening it, listened intently. Then turning sharply away, he paced up and down the room. Of a sudden he paused, and walking slowly to the table, sat down. As he did so, the door opened, and a club servant entered.

"Mr. Brownker, my lord."

Marlborough rose smiling, and his visitor, with all his keenness of perception, could not detect the slightest sign of care or anxiety in the earl's bland face.

"It is not often Mr. Brownker is behind his time."

"I owe your lordship an apology. But," with a glance at the empty bottle and glasses the servant was now removing, "you have, I see, been entertained."

"My Lord of Tottenham," and Marlborough took snuff with steady fingers and stared at Mr. Brownker, "came to converse on urgent private business touching his friend, Mr. Hugh Montgomery."

At this name Brownker's lips tightened involun-

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tarily, and though he smiled, Marlborough saw the movement he had expected to see.

"I trust Montgomery will succeed with your lordship. He is my friend."

"Indeed! Ah—then the bood spilt a month ago was not lost in vain." Marlborough spoke with a slight but perceptible lift of the eye-brows. "You acted, sir, in that affair as became a gentleman."

Brownker bowed, with a slight cough. "Your lordship's kindness emboldens me to proceed at once to my business."

"Business!" Marlborough said with a sigh, seating himself and motioning his visitor to do the same. "I recollect you said you had some business of moment. Let me hear it."

Brownker put down his cane and hat very slowly, and leant upon the table.

"I have a message to you from his Majesty, the King."

"In writing, or by word of mouth?"

"By word of mouth."

Marlborough gave a slight but perceptible shrug of the shoulders. "His Majesty honours me by the messenger he sends, but I should have preferred a letter."

"My words will be to your lordship's advantage and—" He hesitated, as if the right word were difficult to find.

"Oh, pray, sir, give me his Majesty's whole message—if you remember it."

Marlborough's tone was half scornful, half amused. Brownker bowed. "And your lordship's safety."

"Faith, good sir, are you sure you do not mean your own advantage?"

"That," Mr. Brownker said blandly, "is as safe in

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your lordship's hands as your honour in his Majesty's."

"Or my name and reputation in your own, at the St. James's Club, for instance."

Brownker laughed at this retort, and his laugh had a genuine ring.

"A shrewd thrust, my lord, which I know not how to parry. Sure, I must surrender at discretion. In truth, I spoke spitefully that evening, for I was so set upon forcing a meeting on my—my friend, Montgomery, I cared little what I said."

"In other words, you meant not what you said."

"I have come to-day to show your lordship what I really mean."

He bent his head across the table and looked fixedly at Marlborough.

"That is," he added respectfully, "if I have your lordship's permission."

Marlborough crossed his legs, and composed himself as if to listen to a story.

"My full permission. It is so seldom that I or any one have the honour of understanding what Mr. Brownker really means."

Brownker bowed gravely as if acknowledging a compliment.

"His Majesty has heard that your lordship's health is not what it used to be when you were at court; and having a tenderness for the comfort of so loyal a subject as your lordship, he commends to you a sea-voyage as a remedy."

Marlborough smiled.

"Pray inform his Majesty that I am always unwell—at sea."

"So convinced is the King that this would cure your spleen," Brownker went on, "that in his name I



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have chartered for your lordship a vessel, well-found and seaworthy, which sails by to-morrow's tide."

There was a short pause. While Brownker was speaking Marlborough had slightly changed his position by folding his arms. He met Brownker's questioning glance with a face of iron.

"His Majesty's kindness is too great for me to express my gratitude in words."

"The King, my lord, asks only obedience."

"The destination of the vessel, pray?"

"The nearest port on the French coast."

Another pause; then Marlborough's lips stiffened to a pale-blue rim of steel.

"My humble service to his Majesty, but such a voyage would aggravate and not allay the distemper which I suffer from."

"The climate of France is mild, and would, his Majesty believes, prove grateful to your lordship."

"Truly, the air of England has been of late most uninviting, harsh, and chill. But even so, I have no wish to become a subject of the King of France."

"Would not that be preferable, my lord, to being a prisoner at the pleasure of the King of England?"

Marlborough smiled grimly. "His Majesty's loving care of his faithful subjects is well known; but such a condescension as that would require some little explanation."

"It would be found in your lordship's correspondence with King James."

Marlborough was silent a moment, then he answered with a mournful air.

"I had not believed, if my own ears had not heard it, that the imagination of your intelligencers would have gone so far as this. Pray tell his Majesty that in England for such accusations to have weight, even

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against so insignificant a person as myself, they must be proved."

"The proof is to be found in your lordship's own handwriting."

Marlborough was silent. Not by voice or look did he betray the least discomposure. But beneath the mask his strong will kept intact, his heart was beating like a hare's with the greyhounds at its throat. And yet the nearer danger came the keener grew his perceptions and the steadier his nerve.

"A precious crop of weeds," he said shortly, "your diligence has raised."

Brownker nodded complacently.

"When I began, my lord, there was but a grain of evidence, but now, like the mustard-seed of Scripture, it has grown into a tree."

"One blow of an axe from a friendly hand, and the whole would wither at the root."

"If your lordship has a friend who, for a price, would strike this blow, I should advise your lordship to lose not an hour in paying your friend his price."

Marlborough considered a moment, and then gave a meaning smile.

"On my word, sir, my house would ever be open to such a friend."

"And all within your house?"

"Aye, providing he's a friend."

"In that case the ship may sail without your lordship."

Marlborough looked as if he were relieved.

"My safety will be guaranteed?"

"By me."

A gleam shot through Marlborough's eyes. His lips quivered convulsively. The colour which had ebbed from his face until it was ashen-white came

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slowly back. He rose from his chair, and stretched himself as if he had been bound there and was now released; then he turned smiling to his companion. Brownker had also risen. He was grave and quiet, but in his eyes, also, was a gleam of triumph.

"You have relieved my mind," Marlborough said cordially, "and earned my warmest thanks."

Brownker took up his hat and cane.

"Your lordship's house and all within it are, I understand, at the disposal of your friend?"

Marlborough nodded with a cheerful air and a gracious wave of the hand.

"Must you go?"

Brownker bowed, and moved towards the door.

"Your lordship's servant."

He bowed low a second time, and was leaving the room when Marlborough, who had been taking snuff, looked up.

"A word to you, my friend."

Brownker turned and waited.

"You have a kindness, you said, for Master Hugh Montgomery. You will then be interested to hear he has proposed marriage to Mistress Isabel Fretchville, and that if her ladyship agrees I intend to give my consent to their immediate betrothal."

At these words Brownker stood as one turned to stone. Then suddenly approaching Marlborough with teeth exposed and eyes glaring like some animal at bay, he hissed out:

"You play with me, my lord; you dare to play with me!"

"I do assure you, my good sir," Marlborough answered with cool politeness, "I have done that long enough. I am in earnest now."

With a strong effort Brownker controlled himself.

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"Your lordship, then, prefers the air of France, or the confinement of the Tower, to Hollywell and the fulfilment of your promise?"

"My promise was that my house and all within my house was at the disposal of my friend."

"The setting of the jewel is of no value to me when the jewel I crave has been sold."

"You desire—you crave to ruin Isabel?"

"She is my friend, and I desire to pursue that friendship as I choose."

"Which means, if you choose, betrayal. A pardon, but that puts you out of court. No man who could do that is a friend of mine."

"Your lordship is pleased to jest with me," Brownker said very quietly, moving again to the door. "I must leave you to the enjoyment of your wit. I have an appointment with his Majesty. Have you any message to return?"

"When his Majesty sees fit to send me his commands. At present, sir, I have only received yours. And those with humble thanks I do decline."

"I am your lordship's servant."

"I am yours."

They bowed to each other, as men bow before a duel to the death, and went their ways.

Marlborough went home to his town house smiling all the way.

"A near escape. I could have sworn at first that villain knew. For once I have done his little Majesty a wrong. That fellow's lust is stronger than his wit. The cloven hoof peeped out too soon."



## CHAPTER XVI

HUGH arrived in London from St. Albans a little stiff and sore, but otherwise none the worse for his ride. Nor was he in very low spirits. He had been refused, it was true, but if Isabel did not return his love, at least there was good evidence that he stood first in her regard, and the time might come when even her work and independence might lose their charm. Not that Hugh reasoned this out very clearly, or thought the same thing for half an hour together. At one moment he was ready to swear that Isabel had no heart and was laughing at his declaration; the next he could have turned his horse and galloped back to Hollywell, so certain was he there had been love-light in her eyes.

He told Lord Tottenham all about it when he reached London, but Lord Tottenham, though he listened patiently, said little in the way of encouragement. In his own mind he was sure the girl's heart was won, and being fired by the enthusiasm and raptures of his boy, and having behind his crust of rough speech as soft a heart as any woman, he became as determined an advocate as any lover could desire. But he was afraid of Hugh's impatience, and most of all was he afraid of the Countess of Marlborough. He had met her during Hugh's stay at Hollywell, and the fiery lady had used her tongue to such purpose, and expended so sharp a fit of temper upon her old friend,

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that the thought of the possibility of Hugh and her ladyship meeting until something had been done to mollify her wrath, was a constant nightmare to the earl. The position upon Hugh's return became extremely difficult; for Hugh wanted to see her ladyship. He told Lord Tottenham some one must have maligned him, and that an explanation would put all right. Lord Tottenham, who knew her ladyship's mind, shuddered at the bare idea, and finally went off, as we have seen, to Marlborough. The interview over, he was at his wits' end what to do or say. To mention Brownker as the obstacle would mean, he thought, another duel. Yet what excuse could he invent? Just before he reached home, however, an idea struck him, which he thought extremely brilliant.

He found Hugh walking up and down the library like a lion in a cage, and with his hair tumbled all over his face, he looked not unlike one.

"What news, my lord? Does he consent or does he not?"

"Pish, Hugh!" cried the lord cheerfully; "be not in such haste. Come, come. Oddsclub! Are you a man, or some boy-calf sighing for the moon? Gad's life! I say, pluck up, pluck up!"

Hugh leant gloomily against the table, and gritted his teeth.

"This means he does not consent. Then I'll go to him myself to-morrow."

"You will go to-morrow to St. James's Palace? to the King?"

"Ay. My Lords of Nottingham and Sydney are my friends, and one of them shall secure you a private audience with his Majesty. Then if you play your cards aright, sir, you will win everything. How does that fit?"

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Hugh looked at his friend in great bewilderment.

"The King, by to-day's Gazette, is sailing for abroad within three days."

"You must go with him."

"Lord Marlborough said that?" Hugh looked intensely suspicious.

"It is my own suggestion"—Lord Tottenham was fully launched. "But Marlborough approves. Now, let me unfold it to you."

He cast himself luxuriously into his elbow-chair and watched Hugh's face.

"My Lord of Marlborough, Hugh, does not consent, but neither does he refuse consent. His answer was, 'Montgomery must wait'—his own words—'Montgomery must wait.' You will ask why?"

Hugh nodded.

"I will tell you why."

His lordship coughed. It was more difficult to lie to Hugh than he had thought it would be. "The boy has such cursed honest eyes," he thought.

"The reason, lad, is politics. You know naught of such things. But you know that Marlborough is out of favour with the King—you know the whispers and the rumours. They are lies, you'll say, all blasted lies; but they stick with some, and I fear me they stick most of all with his Majesty himself. Now, this is an opportunity for you. Marlborough, I find, can think of nothing at this present but his fallen reputation, and how to raise it. If you would gain favour with him—if you would make him your friend for life and win the maid you love—you must restore that reputation, not by assaulting William's agents at the clubs, but by taking service near the King's own person; winning his confidence, and then when the right moment

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comes, telling him, as once you did tell me, the true worth of his general."

Lord Tottenham stopped for breath. He was exhausted with his exertions, but he was jubilant. For Hugh had caught fire.

"By my faith, my lord, that fits my humour perfectly. After all, what have I done yet to be worthy of such a one as Isabel? She served me, nursed me like an angel back to health, and for this I ask from her her life—everything she has and is. No wonder she should hesitate. In the old days no man called himself a knight until by some great deed he had won his spurs. I will win mine. But"—and suddenly his face fell—"what can I do to serve his Majesty? I have no wits like Brownker; I have no position like yourself. Not even a title to my name to conjure with."

Lord Tottenham laughed.

"Gad's life! you have something more useful than sharp wits; something weightier than a title."

"I cannot catch you——"

"Money, money, money! Lend his most gracious Majesty one year's income—ten thousand pounds—begging as recompense some place in the household which my friends will doubtless have in readiness, and King William shall smile upon you, incline his ear most readily to all you have to say, and if you are discreet and bide your time, give attention even to a prayer for Marlborough."

Lord Tottenham was now as excited as Hugh, and as much in earnest. The notion of attaching Hugh to the court had at first been a forlorn hope—the best to be expected of it a withdrawal of this hot-head from the scene of action until Marlborough had disposed of Brownker. But now, partly from the hold it took on Hugh, partly from the natural tendency of such ideas



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to grow like snowballs rolled down hill, the scheme began to assume magnificent proportions.

They discussed it for two hours, and both being sanguine people, vied with each other in prophesying remarkable results. As a matter of fact Lord Tottenham, having lived mostly in the country for the past twenty years, had almost as little knowledge as Hugh himself of the functions and position of a junior member of the King's household. All he knew was that the King was always short of money; that he had few about his person as reliable as Hugh; and that his Majesty, with all his peculiarities, was one of the few monarchs who appreciated to the full a faithful subject and an honest man. The rest he left to his imagination and to Hugh's.

At six o'clock Lord Tottenham had to go off to a dinner given by an old friend, and Hugh was left alone. He dined at Tottenham Place, and at eight o'clock set out on foot to stroll home to his chambers in Westminster. Lord Tottenham was to see the Secretary of State this evening, and to let Hugh know betimes the next morning where he was to meet him.

Hugh was in a restless state of mind and body. The talk with Lord Tottenham had conjured up visions of public service, and a possible career that fired his soul. He had entered into possession of his fortune intending to buy an estate and become a country gentleman, for he was fond of horses and all outdoor pursuits. Then came love and Isabel, and life was changed to him. Now came ambition. Love was mingled with it. Distinction, the King's favour, service to the country—everything he valued chiefly as a means of raising him in the eyes of the woman he loved. Yet the work had a fascination of its own, and the Hugh Montgomery who looked up at St. James's Palace and

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wondered which of the many twinkling lights there shone from the King's window, was a very different person from the self-absorbed lover who had poured his disappointments, hope, and despair into Lord Tottenham's sympathetic ear two nights before.

He passed the palace slowly, and presently found himself opposite the house where Brownker lived. The clocks were striking nine and the street was dark and deserted. A light flickered here and there in front of some of the larger houses, but these only made the blackness round about them more profound.

Slowly, almost against his will, Hugh approached the house. He had nothing particular to say to Brownker, but his mind was engrossed with one absorbing interest—and Brownker was Agent to the King. He crossed the road; there was no mistaking the house for it was brightly lighted, and men and women came and went there at short intervals, some going in, some coming out; but all entering without hinderance, and at the most only tapping with their fingers on the door before it opened, as if they had pressed some spring. The sight was interesting to Hugh, and for several minutes he stood in the dark and watched the people, speculating idly as to their profession in life by the glimpse he got of their faces under the lamp. At length he made up his mind to go in himself, and was about to cross the road when two men, walking quickly in the same direction, brushed past without seeing him; and as they passed, one of them laughed. Hugh started, and then stood perfectly still. He had heard that laugh before, and his hand instinctively grasped the hilt of his rapier. Then he peered forward, taking care, however, to be himself unseen. The men had stopped a few paces off, and after a whisper one of them—a thin, wiry little creature—darted up the steps

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of Brownker's house and pulled furiously at the bell.

"I want Master Brownker," Hugh heard him say, panting out the words as if he had been running for miles. "I have private business that admits of no delay. Nay, no clerks," he cried in an imperative tone, "nor secretaries. The Agent himself!" The servant's answer was inaudible, but the little man's rejoinders, given in an acrid, high-pitched tone, were significant enough. He wrung his hands. "What, what, what—out, you say—not to be back till midnight! Whither has he gone? My coach is at the corner, and I will follow hot-foot. His address then—is it the St. James's Club? What, what—you cannot tell me? Devil take it, but you must! Hark ye, sirrah, he will lay you by the heels if I should miss him by neglect of yours. Give me directions, most particularly. But I will aid you." The chink of money followed, and then a conversation in whispers, at the end of which the door closed sharply and the little man ran down the steps and rejoined his companion.

All this time Hugh's thoughts were very busy. When in the army he had undertaken more than one perilous scouting expedition in the dark round the enemy's lines. His faculties were always exceedingly alert at night, and a suspicion seized him that there was some great roguery afoot; therefore, while the conversation proceeded at the door, Hugh surveyed his position, and noticing that near the place where the little man's friend was standing there was a passage leading to the back gardens of the houses, a place where a man might stand all night and never be perceived, he crept softly up, and just as the door closed slid within the shadow of the arch which covered the entrance to the passage.

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"Well, then, my Bobbikin," exclaimed the little man in a whisper which Hugh now heard perfectly, "what say? Did I not question him to rights? Brownker hath gone away alone, and though he told none the exact place, it is well known he's going to keep tryst with you."

The other laughed softly. "Then we'll hurry, Lamb, as if the devil were behind us, 'stead of being before. The boys must not think we intended to be late. Wait—my shoe-lace is untied."

He stooped to do it up, and Hugh's fingers tingled. But he kept still and waited too.

"By my soul, Lamb," the man continued, tugging at the lace, "I hardly dared to think that such a fox would put his head into my noose. But, in his conceit, he thinks no man dare lay hands on the King's Agent—ha, ha, ha!"

"And, truly, there's not many—not many," piped the little man timorously. "I trust indeed you'll kill him, Bob. I would not meet that man alive for a thousand pound in gold."

The other laughed as he rose from the ground.

"And I, Lamb, would give a thousand if I had it rather than miss the opportunity of meeting him—alive. Rest easy. I will beat him to a jelly, Lambkin, and then tear his throat in strips, my rat. I will, or my name's not Robert Young."



## CHAPTER XVII

MASTER ROBERT YOUNG and his confederate, Stephen Blackhead, who was known among his friends as the Lamb, from the extreme timidity of his disposition, hurried eastward at so brisk a pace that Hugh found it a difficult matter to keep up with them without danger of discovery. Whither they were bound, he had not an idea; but he had heard enough to understand that some villainy was about, which he must prevent. He might have rung up Brownker's servant, stated what he had overheard, and, finding out the place Brownker was going to, follow armed in force. But this would entail much loss of time, and the rascals would be sure to keep a wary watch for the police. If, as Hugh feared, Brownker had been decoyed into some thieves' stronghold, there would be no way of getting at him but to creep in with these rogues.

So Hugh followed, walking swiftly yet circumspectly, keeping the men just in sight where it was light, but following much more closely where it was dark. He was in the best of spirits. Such an adventure as this suited his restless mood to a nicety, and he was particularly pleased at the thought of paying in such a manner the debt he owed to Brownker.

The men were going citywards, and presently plunged into a network of mean streets, dark, crooked, and as full of dangers as an old well in India of snakes.

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Here and there they met people, men and women both, some in doorways, some leaning out of window, some rolling or slinking across the narrow way—all of the lowest criminal class. Hugh saw that at any moment he might be stopped and questioned, attacked and robbed. The position was critical, and had to be met by a change of tactics. Noticing that Young exchanged a word with one or two as he went, and then hurried on faster than before, Hugh quickened his pace until he was only a few yards behind him. He then turned up his coat-collar and pulled his hat well down over his face, and, counterfeiting a clumsy, rolling gait, adopted the rôle of a follower of Young's, trusting that this gentleman would not look round, or, if he did, would not recognise him. In this way, at least, he was spared interference by others.

Narrower and darker grew the streets; full of foulness now, above and below. The houses were high and dilapidated, each one inhabited by a dozen families or more, and each family accustomed to cast all its refuse into space. Drains had not been dreamt of, and where the open gutters were choked up, as they usually were, a slum of the seventeenth century was a fearsome thing.

At last the men came to a pause at the back of a tall dark house. There was no light near, and the place was lonely. Hugh crept on tip-toe close behind them. A tap on a door, then two more taps. Hugh's heart was beating like a hammer. How was he to get in?

The door was opened, and the light of a lantern, hung on a wall behind it, shone upon the face of a man with a cocked pistol in his hand.

"Eh, you, Parson? That's all well."

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Young scowled. "Blasted oaf that you are," he said harshly. "Is this the way you'd take a fox?"

The man grinned.

"Oons, master, he's in the gin."

Young chuckled himself, and then, seizing the man with the lantern in his great hands, he twirled him round like a top.

"Lead on, lead on, thou whelp of darkness! This is rare, rare, rare! I' faith, I'll make the fortunes of ye all."

The man, nothing loath, climbed briskly up a narrow winding stair. Young followed, licking his lips hungrily, and the street door behind them banged. The stairs were of wood, and the heavy boots of the men made so much noise that neither heard behind them a gasp and faint groan, and the dull thud of a falling body.

At the head of the stairs was another door which opened into a long low room lit by two swinging lamps, one at either end, and two candles that stood on a table in the centre. On the table between the candles were some papers, a hat, a pair of gloves, and a rapier, and close by a heavy chair, screwed to the floor by iron bolts. In this chair sat a man, gagged and bound. So tightly was he pinioned that he could not even turn his head, and only by his eyes, which moved slowly from face to face, was it possible to tell that he was still alive.

Five men were in the room, two putting some artistic finishing touches to the rope which held their prisoner, the other three helping themselves freely from a black bottle. None of them seemed to share the jubilation of Robert Young. That figure in the chair, bound as it was, still had the power to chill their courage. Every one of them avoided the slowly mov-

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ing eyes, and though there were divers bruises on the men's faces, the prisoner himself was neither bruised nor cut.

Young was greeted with a general growl.

"His Reverence, at last! We've milked the cow and he comes to skim the cream. That is Parson!"

"What!" snarled Young, glaring round, "rogues, jail-birds, halter-boys! What's that? Cream—'tis you have had the cream. I'll swear that a hundred pound was in his pockets, and is now in yours. Who brought the fox here? Me! Whose hand was bitten?" holding up the one wounded by Brownker's rapier. "Mine! I went into his lair, you knaves, and risked my life. Ay—near lost it. For what? Why, to bring ye money, and to rid ye of your worst enemy. Another word from you and I will set him free, and will set him on ye—muck-worms!"

A rough laugh greeted this speech, and a man held the bottle towards him.

"Here, Reverence, drink away your spleen, and then to business. A pest on quarrelling until the fox is dead."

Young took the bottle, drank, and smacked his lips. He was gruesome to look upon. His face was covered with patches of black plaster, and his head wrapped round with a dirty-white bandage.

"Business then, bullies." He looked at his prisoner and rubbed his great hands. "Ho, ho!" he said in a croaking voice, "to you the profit, boys, and pelf, but to me—the brush! Lambkin, look here! What!" He turned his head sharply, for there was no response, and the door behind him was closed, or almost closed.

"Satan! the little rat has run!" He laid a hand on the lock. But there came another growl from the men.



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"A pest on Blackhead! He'll be at the Cross by now. Say your grace, Parson, and to meat!"

Young laughed, and turned back again; and no one noticed that the door began to open slowly from the outside.

"Meat!" he cried, catching up the sheathed rapier. "Ay, I'll slice a bit to grill. Nay, but the eyes come first."

He felt the point of the sword with his finger, and leaning one hand on the table, twisted it before the face of his helpless victim, bringing it nearer and nearer, until it was within a few inches of his eyes. The men watched him—fascinated, admiring. They were the offscourings of the prison hulks.

"Surrender—in the King's name!"

The words came in a tone of sharp, military command, and two of the men who had served in the army involuntarily drew stiffly to attention. The rest, even Robert Young himself, cowered, and huddled together like a flock of sheep when a leopard springs into the pen.

In the open doorway stood Hugh, with drawn sword.

"You are trapped," he said. "If any stir to run, they will be shot down."

He spoke in as cool and stern a tone as if he had a regiment behind him on the stairs instead of the senseless body of the unlucky Lamb.

"Loose that gentleman!"

He pointed at the figure in the chair, and eager hands made to tear away the bonds. But before they were touched, Young gave a yelling laugh.

"A bite—a bite, you fools! This coxcomb is alone."

Hugh coolly set his back against the door.

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"Attention, men," he said, as if addressing some one without the window. "When you see a face—fire!"

The thieves hesitated. Some drew their swords. Some held back. But Young laughed loudly, and, catching up the rapier he had dropped at Hugh's appearance, crept towards him on tip-toe.

"Come on, my bullies! It is but two to play with—two instead of one."

He made a swift, fierce lunge, but it was smartly parried, and he fell back heavily on a man behind him to avoid the return. Hugh's back was against the wall. His ruse had failed, and he braced himself for his last fight. But at this moment there was a sharp click and snap of steel; two panels in the wall behind the chair where the bound figure lay swung back, and a man stepped into their midst, a cocked pistol in one hand and a bare rapier in the other. There was a yell of men in mortal terror, for the light of the candles on the table shone upon the face of Karl Brownker. "Two instead of one," he said, with a light, swift lunge, and Robert Young fell gasping to the ground, thrust through the ribs.

"On your knees, you!"

He presented a cocked pistol at the men, and as if mesmerized they obeyed him, numbed and nerveless in their amazement and horror. Then he stamped his foot, and from the place where he had been concealed emerged half a dozen burly messengers, armed to the teeth.

"Free Mr. Chinnic here," he said. "He will be a trifle cramped. Bind these rogues securely."

He turned to Hugh.

"It was a bite, friend, after all. But none the less I owe you thanks."

## CHAPTER XVIII

"ON my faith, Brownker, you are the deadliest enemy a man could have. That poor devil, Young! I swear I pity him."

"Wait until to-morrow."

"Why not to-day then?"

"He will not die to-day."

Hugh stared, shrugged his shoulders, and went on with his breakfast in silence.

They were in Brownker's sitting-room, the morning after their adventure. Brownker had insisted upon carrying Hugh home with him the night before, and Hugh had been nothing loath. The expressions of gratitude which were dropped by Brownker—the more impressive because so deeply and quietly made—had warmed into strong life an idea which had vaguely crossed Hugh's mind before the adventure.

Yet it was with mixed feelings that Hugh accepted the hospitality of the man he had once so ardently desired to kill.

"A wonderful good fortune," Hugh remarked, with his mouth full, "that Chinnic so resembles you, and that Young was absent at the hour of the appointment. Your man, clever as he is, would not have deceived that fellow."

"I knew he would not come until the capture had been made. The Parson is one of those who always contrives that other fingers shall pull his chestnuts

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from the fire. I had a trusty little spy within the house, who discovered to me the space behind the panelling. The messengers were let in an hour before. I joined them on the arrival of Young's knaves, witnessed everything, and was about to make my coup when you saved me the trouble."

Hugh laughed.

"If I had known! Yet I am still in a mist on one point. You said last night that the paper Young was to hand to you was of no importance. What, then, was your motive for taking the trouble of planning so stupendous a—bite? Pardon, if I am impertinent."

"A man who has done what you have done must go far before he can be impertinent."

"Pish! I did just what you would do, or any man, when he found danger attending on a friend. But as I was going to say——"

"Friend!" Brownker exclaimed abruptly. "You look on me as a friend?"

He rose from the table and warmed his hands at the fire, for it was a cold March morning.

Hugh followed, and rested his arms on the chimney-piece.

"Why ask such a question after Hampstead?"

"Because scores of men will swear friendship but not one wishes to put it to a test."

Hugh looked up with a start and then turned away.

"You read my thoughts. Have no fears; I will not put your friendship to a test."

Brownker raised his eyebrows in genuine surprise.

"You refuse to ask a favour from a man you nearly died for? Faith, I could not have believed you would so punish me."

Hugh flushed, for Brownker's voice was grave and earnest.



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"You do not know what favour I was going to ask."

"Until you ask it, I deny that your friendship is worthy of the name."

"But if it were a test?"

Brownker made a curious, wry face.

"Then it will not be the first I have withstood, though I think the last was called an 'opportunity.' Your mind?"

Hugh cleared his throat.

"I had a wish to—I am seeking an introduction to the King."

Mr. Brownker nodded carelessly.

"In half an hour I have an audience with him. We will go together. Now, what else?"

But Hugh's breath was taken away. "See his Majesty in half an hour!" he faltered. "But—but—my clothes!"

Mr. Brownker gave a contemptuous sniff.

"Have you ever seen his Majesty's clothes? If you would win William's favour, show no consideration for your clothes."

"Thank Heaven!" muttered Hugh devoutly. Then his face grew troubled. "But I was to meet my Lords Sydney and Nottingham at noon, to hear whether they could arrange an audience."

"They can't," Brownker said shortly. "The King will see no one except on private and most urgent business before he goes to Holland. You may take the word from me."

Hugh smiled.

"I have heard enough and seen enough to take anything from you. But, I have a favour to ask his Majesty."

"No one ever seeks an audience for anything but

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favours, which is why his Majesty so heartily detests audiences. But the favour shall be granted, if I can compass it."

Hugh's eyes grew moist.

"Brownker, you are a friend indeed."

"Prove me first," was the rejoinder. "Well?"

"I want to serve his Majesty; to gain his confidence. I had thought of asking for a place—some small place—in his household. I would pay highly for it."

"And lose your money. Understand, the men of William's household, unless they are Dutchmen, are trusted less by William even than the members of his Privy Council; less than his ministers; and less, if that be possible, than my Lord of Tottenham's friends, the Viscount Sydney and the Earl of Nottingham."

Hugh's eyes grew big with perplexity.

"If that is true, then the men who are at the King's right hand are trusted least of all."

Brownker smiled, as one smiles at a prattling child.

"I do assure you," he said, speaking very slowly, his eyes fixed on Hugh's face, "not our noble friend, the Earl of Marlborough himself, is suspected so shrewdly by the King of treason as some of his present ministers of state."

Hugh changed countenance. For an instant he hung his head with knitted brow, then raised it with the sudden look of a man resolved.

"Brownker, you have called my friendship into question because I hesitated to ask from you this favour. I will prove now I had good reason for my diffidence. My object for seeking service with the King is to get his ear and plead to him the cause of Marlborough, and I do this—Gad! you shall know

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all before you aid me—I do it to win favour with Isabel Fretchville. Will you help me now?”

Hugh's face was burning, but he stood firmly before Brownker ready for irony, anger, surprise—anything but what he got.

Brownker's face showed no emotion whatever. For a few moments he was silent, then answered in his quietest tone: “I will help you.”

Hugh looked at him in amazement; then his face stiffened and his mouth set hard.

“I was told once somewhat concerning you and Isabel, but I would kill a man who said it now. *That* is not true?”

“It is not true.” Brownker's voice was cold and clear as the drip of water in a mountain spring. “We have been friends. No more.”

Hugh drew a long breath like one relieved of a heavy weight.

“Your pardon.”

Their fingers met in a close grip. But Hugh noticed and remembered afterward that Brownker's were very cold.

A church-bell clanged outside.

Brownker laid a hand upon Hugh's arm.

“It is time to meet the King.”

## CHAPTER XIX

THE way through St. James's Palace to the King's private apartment was devious and long, and at every door and in every passage were soldiers. But there was no delay. Each guard saluted, and all doors opened at Karl Brownker's nod. In the anteroom to the King's closet, however, they had to wait, for some one was with the King. Here a gentleman came up to them, at sight of whom Brownker whispered to Hugh, "Nottingham," and then bowed low.

"Your lordship's humble servant."

The Secretary of State replied with a slight and supercilious nod. "If this gentleman desires to see the King, Brownker, he has come on a fruitless errand."

"But if the King desires to see this gentleman, my lord?" Brownker said smoothly.

The earl's clever but ill-tempered face began to twitch.

"I must tell you the King has desired he may not be interrupted. So close is he, I myself cannot introduce a gentleman I had promised my Lord Tottenham to present to-day."

"Was it one Mr. Hugh Montgomery, my lord?"

"You have the man's name."

"Let me introduce to your lordship the owner of the name."



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Lord Nottingham looked very much surprised, and not best pleased.

"My congratulations, sir," he said stiffly as Hugh bowed, "that you should have found a friend more powerful, though not more willing than myself."

"Your lordship must forgive me," Hugh said with a coolness that slightly surprised Brownker, "if, knowing you were engaged in high affairs of state, and meeting Mr. Brownker unexpectedly, I ventured to take my opportunity with him. It is vital to my interests I should see the King to-day."

"Your interests, my young sir," the lord said patronizingly, "will not be served by over-haste."

Karl coughed. "Your lordship, then, knows the purpose of our audience?"

"Your purpose, my good Brownker, is never far to seek. A plot, or a pretended plot."

Brownker sighed.

"Your lordship is near the mark. For the matter concerns a minister of state."

He spoke with deliberate impertinence. The earl's lips tightened, though he strove to preserve a contemptuous calm. "You choose a bad subject for your mirth," he said, "when you try your wit on me."

"Your lordship? Nay"—Brownker raised his eyebrows in mock dismay—"at least, I trust not; the minister I mean lies under suspicion of high treason."

"The devil take your insolence!" Lord Nottingham had boiled over at last. "I will not be gibed by you, sir, though you do sit in the pocket of the King."

"My lord—my Lord of Nottingham——"

The door of the King's chamber had opened, and a little brown-faced man with keen eyes and a huge nose, dressed in a claret-coloured suit that did not fit

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him, and a peruke very much out of curl, stood there watching them.

All uncovered with deep bows, and the Earl of Nottingham became affected with a violent fit of coughing.

"My Lord of Nottingham," the little man said, when his lordship had recovered. "When my agent comes to me upon important business, be good enough to waste no words upon him. Karl, I am alone."

He turned away, and went back into his room without waiting for a reply, leaving the door open. Brownker, bowing profoundly to the discomfited earl, followed, signing to Hugh to accompany him.

"A chill day," his Majesty said, coughing and shivering. "I woke this morning with catarrh. Ugh, ugh—even the weather disagrees with me in England."

He had walked to his writing-table and while speaking covered with a quick movement some papers there; then, turning from it and clasping his hands behind his back—a favourite attitude of his—he slowly approached Hugh, taking no notice of Brownker.

"Master Hugh Montgomery, late of my Fusiliers. What do you want, sir?"

At this abrupt address Hugh gasped, then recovered himself, and said bluntly:

"To serve your Majesty."

William grunted.

"That means a commission." Then with a quick jerk of the head—"Karl, what does he want?"

"Something more than a commission, sire. You may remember the history of his family and fortunes——"

"I remember this," the King said with another grunt. "It was his father who laid violent hands upon the person of King Charles for some trifling attention

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to his wife, and his mother's father who was bosom friend of Cromwell's—a worthy family—*mon Dieu!*”

“An honest one, your Majesty,” Hugh said boldly. “God knows.”

“He may know, sir,” was the sharp reply, “but I do not. Karl, explain it all.”

“Mr. Montgomery, sire, is the best man I can find in England to discover to you the true purpose and designs of the Earl of Marlborough.”

At this name William's bearing changed as a hawk's when sailing over a field it sees its prey below.

“So!” he snapped. “What is there of Marlborough? What then?”

“Only his lordship's signature, sire, has been put to a paper which, if proved genuine, must send him to the block condemned even by his warmest friends; but which, if a forgery”—he raised his voice and looked at Hugh whose face was scarlet with anger and astonishment—“I say, if a forgery, will go far to assure your Majesty that the earl has been accused unjustly. Mr. Montgomery, a devoted follower of the earl, but at the same time a loyal subject to yourself, and a friend of mine, offers to aid us to unfold this mystery. Your Majesty could find no better man.”

The King glanced slowly at the faces of the young men: at Brownker's cool and quiet, Hugh's flushed and amazed.

“The paper, Karl.”

Brownker took out a piece of folded parchment and his Majesty took it to the window.

The room was very still as the King read this paper. Hugh, breathless with excitement, was bewildered and stunned by the strange turn of affairs. This was the paper “of no importance,” as Brownker had

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called it the night before. Yet though startled, he was confident of Brownker's good faith. Nothing less than full investigation he saw clearly would satisfy the King that Marlborough was innocent. A revulsion of feeling now took place in Hugh's mind towards his Majesty. No longer did he appear a person of mean stature, and curt, uncivil manners. The impassive face now became stern and terrible. The slight, bent figure seemed to grow in height and dignity. His dark, penetrating eyes, usually cold and slightly sinister, burned with indignation, and from the whole face, pinched and haggard with ill-health and a dyspeptic temperament, shown out the kingly soul within, the intrepid, manly heart, and glorified it. As Hugh met his glance, a glance swift and eagle-like, he felt a curious shock. He was no more in the presence of a man he might love or hate like other men, but in the presence of the King.

"My life on it, this signature is Marlborough's," his Majesty said, handing the paper to Hugh. "You know his hand, sir?"

Hugh bowed.

"Then examine this writing, after which, Karl, you must read aloud this 'Association.'"

Hugh took the parchment, and on the last page, in fair unmistakable characters, with others, was Marlborough's name.

"Your judgment," the King said sharply.

Hugh forced himself to speak.

"Your Majesty is right."

"And yet, I'd swear, sir," the King rejoined, "you still remain a follower of the Earl of Marlborough."

Hugh's eyes flashed.

"Your Majesty's words are neither just nor true."



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At this Brownker coughed significantly. But William chuckled.

"*Ma foi!* I must mind my tongue, ah? or be shaken like King Charles. Nay"—as Hugh would have spoken—"not a word. The dish is to my taste. Let me believe I have for once met an honest Englishman. Karl, read the 'Association,' and read slowly. I would no word may fall unheeded by Lord Marlborough's friend."

He had seated himself at the table, and leaning his chin upon his hand, sat still and looked at Hugh under his heavy brows.

"We, whose names are subscribed," Brownker read, "solemnly promise in the presence of God to contribute our utmost assistance towards King James's recovery of his kingdom. That to this end we will have ready to meet him, at his landing, 30,000 men, well armed. That we will seize upon the person of the Princess of Orange, dead or alive, and take care that some strong garrisons should be forthwith delivered into his hands, and furnish him with a considerable sum of money for the support of his army. Dated this 20th day of March, 1691."

Brownker paused, and Hugh gave a deep sigh.

"Your Majesty will allow me a question?"

"There is no question," snapped the King, "but you may speak."

"The man who gave up this 'Association' is an abandoned rogue. How know we that it is not all a counterfeit?"

"Because you know it seems Lord Marlborough's signature."

"Then the presence of the name is to be accepted as proof of guilt."

"Stay your tongue, sir," cried the King peevishly.

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"Were this accepted, as you call it, as a proof, my lord would be in the Tower and your services not needed."

Hugh bowed humbly.

"I crave pardon."

"Learn patience, sir. *Mon Dieu!* you are all impulse. Now answer me this question. Serve you Lord Marlborough, innocent or guilty, or will you serve her Majesty? Make up your mind at once; express it openly."

Hugh bowed again.

"I serve her Majesty, and you, sire, with my life."

William nodded.

"That is better, and Karl, here, trusts you, which is best of all. But have you counted the whole cost?"

"The whole cost, your Majesty."

"Then you may go upon the business. Karl, arrange your friend's proceedings. Fare you well, sir. Be diligent and discreet. Fare you well."

The King waved his hand in dismissal. But Hugh did not move.

"I have something I would crave from your Majesty," he said, "in return."

"Ha, no Englishman serves his King for naught! No, no. Well, speak, sir."

"If it should be proved that after all this paper is but counterfeit I ask that your Majesty will give me in your own handwriting a few words stating that in your belief my Lord of Marlborough is a loyal subject."

The King rubbed his chin slowly and shook his head.

"That is more than I could do."

Hugh drew himself up.

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"Then, I must beg your Majesty to find one who will act sleuth-hound better than myself, for I will not touch the trail."

The King smiled grimly.

"In other words, you had intended to serve Lord Marlborough under pretence of serving me."

"If my lord is innocent, I might without harm serve both."

The King looked at Brownker with a grimace. "That does not satisfy, eh, Karl?"

"Your Majesty will not be a loser by the service of my friend even upon his own conditions."

William laughed dryly.

"Nay, then I need not hesitate. Prove my lord's innocency, sir, and I will proclaim it."

Hugh moved to the door.

"I am your Majesty's most obedient servant," he said earnestly.

"Until I refuse to do your bidding," muttered the King as the door closed. "*Mon Dieu!* these Englishmen. Karl, what is it all about?"

He spoke in Dutch now, in the tone a man of business uses to his confidential clerk. "This paper is counterfeit, though the cunningest I have seen. What!"

Brownker smiled.

"It is a means to an end, sire."

"Marlborough's ruin. But how?"

"By the simplicity of this Montgomery, and the ingenuity of his cousin, the Lady Susan's daughter, agent to James Stuart."

"But the forgery?"

"Is a first step. I am preparing a trap, and a bait was necessary."

William took a sharp turn up and down the room.

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"My good friend," he said suddenly, "you are much too confident. I know these Englishmen. They are dull in wit, prejudiced and narrow in their minds. But they are not, even when they happen to be honest, one half so simple as they look."



## CHAPTER XX

THERE was rejoicing and gladness in the mansion of the Churchills. The children were rampaging all over the house, the servants going about their work with cheerful faces, and even the labourers and tenants on the estate, a stolid race, wore the air of relief and enjoyment of boys when they get an unexpected holiday. The Earl of Marlborough had returned to his home and left the countess in London.

The earl was liked by his tenants, respected by his servants, adored by his children. His lady was feared by her children, cordially detested by the tenants of the estate, and in the eyes of her servants was a tyrant unspeakable.

Yet Marlborough was not a generous master. No service was ever paid for by him a penny over its market price, and not infrequently below it. But he treated all kindly and considerately, and interfered with no one's private affairs. The countess, on the contrary, had her finger in the pies of every person in her house, and if anything happened to them without her knowledge and approval, they rued it. Not seldom this resulted in great practical advantages for her dependents. Many an obscure lad or maid rose to place and power through the keenly discerning eye of Sarah Marlborough and the dominant will which swept everything before it until the crash in 1710. But how they hated her! Even her favourites hated her—in

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deed, often her favourites most of all. Her violent temper, which spared none until it had run its course, and her restless, busy, managing soul, which never could be still a moment or endure passivity in others, but must be forever pushing all towards the particular goal of her ambition for the time being—these weaknesses spoilt all the virtues she possessed. Two persons only, her husband and Isabel, endured patiently her passions and her tempers, and appreciated all that lay behind—the determination to expose shams whenever she met them, and her haughty denial to any rank or power of the right to dictate principles of action and govern the conscience even of the humblest person. Tyrannical herself, yet Lady Marlborough fought to the last against tyranny in others. Grasping and close in money matters, and loving money desperately, she could be generous in charitable gifts, and in all her official business as Mistress of the Robes to Anne was scrupulously accurate in her accounts. In an age reeking with peculation, Lady Marlborough was never seriously accused of misappropriating any of her mistress's money.

None of these qualities, however, appealed to those about her. To servants, dependents, and children she was a scourge and an object of dread. When she had a mind she could be charming, and her children then timidly sunned themselves in her kindness, but all looked on it as exceptional, as when stroking a tiger through the bars of a cage, one keeps a sharp watch for its claws. All was different when Marlborough ruled the house alone. Then with a smile and a sigh Madam Carrington would shut up the lesson-books and quietly take up her embroidery work and retire within herself. The rule of the school-room was over. Holidays were proclaimed, and the future leader

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of the armies of Europe was overrun rough-shod by an uproarious, undisciplined mob.

They climbed on his bed at dawn and serenaded him with whistles and drums. They lay in wait all the morning outside his library door where he was writing and seeing visitors, and the instant he appeared alone they charged him in force and dragged him captive off to play. They chattered to him all through his meals, and nothing but the authority of Isabel enabled him to dine at night and drink his solitary bottle of wine in peace.

Marlborough made little resistance. Perhaps the knowledge of the iron curb put upon them all at other times had something to do with this.

We see him on the lawn a few weeks after his interview with Karl Brownker on a fine bright April afternoon with Charley on his shoulder. A race was to be run by the whole family, with Isabel at the winning-post—the earl's cane with her own hat upon it—to proclaim the winner. She waved her handkerchief as a signal, and away they all went with a shout—a merry crew. Charley was madly excited, and mercilessly kicked his patient steed, who, though heavily handicapped, came in first and secured the prize for the marplot—an immense sugar-plum, which, coming from France, might have been seized by the King's agent as an evidence of treasonable correspondence with James if it had not happened to have been presented to the family by Karl Brownker himself.

"That youngster grows heavier day by day," the earl exclaimed to Isabel, as the nursery-bell rang and the children scampered off to tea. "A pity you cannot feed your calves on the same principle you nourish Charley, and we should grow bullocks such as no one ever saw."

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"If your lordship would purchase from my Lord Godolphin those yearlings he offered me," Isabel said demurely, "I would put them in the home pasture and——"

But Marlborough had stopped his ears with an exclamation of horror.

"What, again! Why did I mention calves? Another word of it, farmer, and I take horse for London. On my oath, you are a very leech for draining me of money. Not a calf—not a calf's tail."

"Then your lordship's beeves," Isabel said imperiously, "will continue to fetch a less price than my Lord Godolphin's, though our pasture is by far the richer. If it should please you to spend only fifty pounds——"

"My child," Marlborough interposed in a very gentle tone, but which quenched Isabel at once, "I have now not fifty pounds to spend. Pray, change the subject."

Isabel put on her hat and prepared to return to the fields, when he detained her.

"Nay, do not go away. Let us walk together where we can be alone and unobserved. Take me to your haunt."

Isabel led the way to the Nun's Walk, wondering and curious. She had rather expected when my lord arrived from London that he would say something to her about Hugh Montgomery, for she was certain in her own mind that Hugh would go to him; but a week had passed, and the earl had made no sign.

The evening was fine and clear, but there was still some crispness and sharpness in the air. They walked fast.

"The third year of your service, Farmer Isabel,"



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Marlborough said as the garden gate closed behind them. "The last of three very profitable years for the estate."

Isabel coloured deeply with pleasure. She was very sensitive to praise from him.

"I have tried," she said simply, "but so often failed that I fear the result is a sorry one. Yet if it satisfies you, my lord, I am content."

"I am satisfied," Marlborough said, placing her hand on his arm and falling into step with her, "that in all my life I never spent fifty pounds a year to better purpose than on you. Alas that the time comes soon, or has come, when all the money I possess would fail to keep you steward of my estate!"

He laid a finger on her hand as he spoke, and felt it quiver. She said nothing for a few moments; then in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone—

"Mr. Montgomery has been to you, my lord."

Marlborough cleared his throat.

"Another gentleman was in my mind."

Isabel turned sharply, and met a look she could not read—kind, grave, penetrating. A chill dread struck her.

"I know what your lordship thinks," she said in a low voice. "But if my word has any weight—perhaps it has not, being a woman's—I assure you I thought of nothing but a mere friendship when I became acquainted with Mr. Brownker."

Marlborough caressed the hand on his arm.

"My dear daughter Isabel, do you suppose I knew so little as to suspect you of coquetry? As soon would I harbour jealous thoughts of my dearest Sarah. No, my meaning was that the time has soon to come when I shall be whistling for a steward, with two such fine gentlemen courting you. Two, did I say? A pardon.

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This Montgomery is but a raw stripling. I meant one!"

He was still holding her hand. But it was now rather the pressure of a doctor's fingers than the caress of a friend.

Isabel, who carried her hoe in the other hand, turned aside to uproot a weed.

"Your lordship will deem me rude, but it is in my mind to say that I should not have thought you would speak slightly of Mr. Hugh Montgomery."

"Indeed, I do not," he replied tranquilly. "But compared to Brownker he is raw and rude, and the man of polish and wit whom you have known some months must take preference to the youth. True, by a chance, Hugh served you, and you repaid the service by a word which saved his life, and after, nursed him through his sickness. Such acquaintance has naturally bred affection on both sides: on his the lover's, on your own the sister's—poor Montgomery!"

He smiled, swung his cane slowly to and fro, and watched her with half-closed eyes. Isabel had drawn her hand from his arm and was now in the midst of a clump of immense thistles, massacring one after another. When the colony was reduced to a heap of corpses, she rejoined him, smiling.

"Your lordship will forgive me. I could not pass them by."

He pretended to shiver.

"You make me tremble, farmer, for your lovers."

"Lovers! I think your lordship has disposed of both. The one, you say, is to be my brother. The other I know to be my friend."

"Friendship is a first step sometimes——"

"And the last, my lord, sometimes."

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Marlborough stopped swinging his cane, with a short laugh, and Isabel looked up, puzzled.

"Your pardon, my lord?"

"Nothing, Farmer Isabel. I was but a-laughing at my own simplicity and the shallowness of my perceptions."

Isabel flushed all over, but she tried to laugh too.

"Your perceptions are as deep, my lord, as any man's or woman's nature goes. Pray what have you perceived?"

"That you whom I have treated as a child are in reality a woman—a woman of the world—Miss Isabel Fretchville." He deepened his voice to a tone of profound respect and made her a courtly bow. "I crave your forgiveness and acknowledge, with all imaginable humbleness, that I have misjudged you."

Isabel interrupted him. "I cry your lordship mercy, but I cannot endure this bitter kind of jesting. How have I displeased you?"

Her voice was full of keen reproach, and there were tears in her eyes. Marlborough's face grew gentle at once.

"Displeasure, child! I am but displeased at my own dulness concerning Mr. Hugh Montgomery, and tender full apologies."

Isabel bit her lip, but did not lower her eyes.

"And why, my lord, should you apologize to me?"

"Because I forgot that this young gentleman had ten thousand pound a year."

Marlborough spoke coolly and cheerfully, but his eyes were watchful. The colour in Isabel's face died out.

"I can not fail to understand your lordship," she said in a dry hard tone. "It is your belief then that I shall marry Mr. Montgomery for his fortune."

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Marlborough raised his eyebrows. "Nay, my dear Isabel, I go no such lengths as marriage; unless, indeed, without my knowledge you are betrothed already; and that I do not believe."

"I thank your lordship for so much confidence."

"I have perfect confidence. Poor Brownker!"

He muttered the last words aside, with a sigh. Isabel's throat was dry and her eyes were smarting, but there were no tears in them now.

"It is right you should know what passed, my lord, between Mr. Montgomery and me."

"That is as you please, Isabel."

"You are my guardian, my lord."

"By your condescension I assume the title when I think it is for your advantage, but I claim no authority and have none."

"You have full authority," Isabel cried warmly. "Even if I had yielded to Mr. Montgomery's importunity—which I did not—and had loved him as he says that he loves me, I should have refused to think of marriage until he had obtained your full consent."

"Be careful, be careful," Marlborough said, smiling deprecatingly. "You will say next, child, you are willing to marry any man that I may recommend."

He had taken her hand again, and in his eyes there was shrewd inquiry. Isabel looked up fearlessly.

"A man, my lord, commended by you, should be everything that I could wish for in a husband—when I desire to marry. Without your approval I would refuse an archangel."

Marlborough pressed her hand.

"I thank you, child," he said gravely. "I will confess that I have been asked for my consent by two gentlemen. I have not given it, wishing to see you first."



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Now I will ask this much of you—that you grant no further favour or encouragement to either until I am able to send word which I think more worthy, and my reasons. Is that too hard a measure?”

“Indeed, no,” Isabel said simply. “I trust you. But there is no danger. Mr. Montgomery went away of his own will. Karl, I dismissed.”

There were steps in the garden—quick, hasty steps. The gate was flung open and one of the servants ran down the walk with a letter in his hand.

“A messenger has rid from London, my lord,” the man said breathlessly, “and should return with a reply to-night.”

Marlborough looked at the letter curiously, and Isabel noticed that the direction on it was written in a woman's hand. When it was torn open, several closely written sheets appeared, at which the earl sighed dolefully.

“Timothy, begone to the messenger and bid him to the kitchen to refresh; and see you his horse is baited.” Then as the man went off he added as if to himself, “Mistress Montgomery has much to say. My faith, I must peruse it at leisure in my library.” He stood a moment, however, and glanced down the page, and Isabel saw that his hand tightened on the paper.

“It is a summons to London,” he said quietly. “Be so good as to see that my things are all in order. I must start to-night. Tell no one whither I am gone.”

Isabel sighed.

“So soon! But, at least, the countess will rejoice.”

Marlborough folded the letter up and looked at it thoughtfully.

“I shall not see the countess—at least for a few

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days. This business is political and secret. If any letter comes from my dear soul or from the princess, send it by messenger to the St. James's Club. Now I must haste."

He strode off quickly to the house.

## CHAPTER XXI

THE morning after Marlborough's summons to London Karl Brownker dressed himself with peculiar care. In most things a frugal person, he spent large sums on dress. His attentions to the fair sex were partly the cause of this, but had he never wooed a court lady, he must have been always well attired. It was the nature of the man to take pains to excel; and to be careful and particular in everything pertaining to his person. His peruke, which he had adopted out of compliment to his master, though most of the court gallants still wore their own hair, was a masterpiece of its kind, and suited to a nicety his sallow, cadaverous face, removing much of the heaviness of his features. His coat, cut by the best tailor in town, was of the latest French fashion, and a great contrast to the large-flapped, broad-skirted garments affected by the Dutch noblemen and by William himself. This subject of dress was the only one upon which the King and his agent disagreed.

Karl breakfasted at seven, wrote letters, interviewed three people on important business, and then rang for his valet. It was now eight o'clock.

"I shall be out until noon, Chinnic. If Mr. Montgomery calls in my absence, inform him I am about his business, and will meet him at six of the clock at the club. How is the Parson?"

"Out of danger, sir, and urgent in his prayers for a visit from you."

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Brownker smiled.

"Tell him that this will come about sooner than he wishes, but that first he must make more blood—to lose."

Chinnic grinned sympathetically.

"I have told him so until he gnaws his fingers to the bone. You would not know the man. His hair is turning white."

Brownker nodded approvingly.

"Keep the leeches on him another day or two. Then I will see him." He drew on his gloves. "If Lord Marlborough calls, remember I am with the King."

Chinnic bowed, and his master leisurely went out. A diminutive groom was at the door, holding with great difficulty a powerful horse with a Roman nose and a wicked eye. This horse Brownker mounted lightly, the creature becoming obedient at once when he felt his master's hand.

"Oons," panted the little groom to the footman at the door. "See that! There's witchcraft there. This devil nigh tore my arms to pieces and now he'd lap milk. 'Odds foot, I wish the brute was dead!"

The footman smiled the superior smile of his race.

"Which brute?" he said, and closed the door.

Mr. Brownker did not go to St. James's Palace. He rode westward until the streets of St. James's gave way to larger detached houses; these to market gardens, and these to open fields. The horse was fresh, and the day was bright, but Brownker's face was thoughtful and he rode slowly. He had begun a campaign a few days ago, and launched himself into a life or death encounter with the cleverest man in England. He was confident of success, but he was far too wide-awake not to count beforehand, and weigh can-



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didly, all the dangers and difficulties which lay in the path.

Marlborough's name, though not world-wide as yet, was known in every European court, and in all calculations made by William's enemies and William's friends, Marlborough's personality counted for more than that of any other. Brownker knew this, and, what was more, he appreciated as few others did the energy which lay behind Marlborough's quiet exterior, and the swiftness of action of which his calm brain was capable. All this, as his own plans developed, Karl knew that he would have to reckon with, and he did not doubt that it would take all his strength and wit to carry those plans through. Yet he was confident, for he held trump cards. Not the least of these was Hugh Montgomery, and to-day, as Karl rode westward by the river, he began his musings by considering how Hugh should be played. But that reflection did not hold him very long. The manipulation of such a man as this was a bagatelle; with his open nature Hugh was like an instrument the notes of which Brownker knew by heart. Of more importance by far, and of greater difficulty, was the person whom he was now on his way to see, and whose fingers must be trained to perform not only upon Hugh but on Marlborough as well.

Thinking of this, Karl reached his destination, the village of Chelsea. At the principal inn there he dismounted, and answering with a curt nod the obsequious salutation of the innkeeper, he refused refreshment and walked briskly away on foot. Leaving the road to Chiswick and Staines he turned to the right up a country lane, which after many twists brought him to a stone wall, moss-grown and very old, some eight or nine feet high. Behind the wall were trees,

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and a long, low house, of which the roof and chimneys were just visible—a house which looked like some old nunnery or monastery, so secluded and shut out was it from the haunts of men.

A monastery, indeed, the place had once been. It was known, even now, by the name of the Abbey House, but though its inmates lived—for good and sufficient reasons—a secluded life, the monasticism of the place was but an outer shell which contained a kernel of another kind.

At the door, studded with nails, and of severest aspect, Karl paused, and gave a sharp, powerful pull at the bell. Far away came a hollow cling-clang followed by the hoarse baying of mastiffs. An interval of silence followed, which was too long for Brownker's patience, and then a heavy, measured tread on the other side of the door, and through a grating a pair of eyes sharply inspected the caller.

"Open, Pat," Brownker said impatiently. "Would you keep me here all day?"

A clash of bolts, and the door swung back.

"Sure, your honour," answered a deep voice, "it's the toimes—the onaisy toimes that is inhospitable, not me."

The speaker was an immensely big man, in a faded, threadbare livery. He had a shock of stiff black hair, and a broad humorous Irish face, which looked as if Nature had intended, in the first instance, to have given him a frank and open aspect, and then suddenly changed her mind. For his eyes were small and shifty.

"The lady Susan Montgomery at home?"

"Pinin' for a sight of ye indade!"

"The Mistress Marie?"

"Waitin' like a flower for the sun, yer honour."

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They were walking down a long covered stone passage which led from the outer door to the house. Half-way Brownker touched the big servant with the end of his riding-whip.

"The news!" he said in a whisper.

"Not a ha'porth," was the reply.

"The news, I say, from France." Brownker spoke slowly and distinctly.

The Irishman scratched his head with a puzzled air. "Why, yes, there was a messenger came yesterday, but not a word of interest could I wring from him, bedad! King James is eager, sez he, and King Louis is not, sez he, and so the talk is big, and the doin's nowt, sez he."

"I hear rumours that an invasion has been planned?"

Patrick smiled a childlike smile of admiration.

"Sure, if your honour says so it must be so. Ye're always right. I have heard the same myself, now I come to think."

"Well, then, sirrah!" Brownker's face became sharp and eager.

"Well, then, your honour," was the cheerful answer. "Let us pray King James will soon be here; but, bedad, his Majesty—the Lord protect him!—has been invading England this two years past, and has not landed yet."

Brownker looked at the Irishman stonily a moment, then turned away with a shrug which might mean anything, and without waiting to be announced strode up a flight of stone steps and tapped at a door where a sharp, tremulous voice said "Enter," and he vanished from Pat's view.

The big servant stood looking after him, and then slowly and deliberately raised a huge fist and shook it.

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"A curse on ye, ye Protestant rat! Ye Dutch grindstone! Did ye think you'd twist it out of me—did ye? Nay, nay, if she tells she tells, but I'll be drawn, and racked, and broken on the wheel before I tell."

In the room above Brownker was kissing the hand of a little old lady with bright bird-like eyes, dressed in the fashion of half a century before and surrounded by its reminiscences. Her hands sparkled with rings. Her face was covered with paint and powder, and on a velvet cushion near a fire, which made the room intolerably close, lay a pair of fat King Charles spaniels.

Yet there was evidence in this room of desperate poverty. The covers of the chairs, once handsome and of great price, were dropping to pieces with age; the carpet was full of holes, and the very dress the old lady wore had been turned and trimmed half a dozen times, and was now approaching the last stage of dissolution.

Mr. Brownker bowed with an appearance of profound respect.

"Your ladyship's most humble servant."

"My dear Karl," she said graciously, "I am pleased to see ye. But the salute—the salute."

He was looking round the room as if searching for some one. At these words he turned to a portrait on the wall and bowed low to it.

"God save his Majesty King James!" he said solemnly.

The old lady curtsied to the portrait herself, lowering her eyes as if she were in the presence of royalty.

"May he soon enjoy his own again," she cried. "Amen."

There was an earnestness in her voice and simple dignity in her manner which made the little ceremony,



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evidently a custom of the house, impressive, in spite of the fact that the portrait was a most detestable daub, and that her ladyship's own face was highly rouged and tinted after the manner of faded beauties of the Restoration days.

"You are looking for Marie," she said sharply, as his eyes again wandered around the room. "She will be here when she can leave the kitchen. We must cook—to eat."

"The Mistress Montgomery's cooking," Brownker said sweetly, "would tempt a king to eat."

The old lady gave a cackling laugh.

"'Odds my life, young man, keep your compliments until she comes. You'll need 'em all. She does not like you, Karl."

"I rest on your ladyship's favour."

"And indeed you may, while you are true to his most gracious Majesty. And why have you not brought my nephew, Hugh Montgomery?"

She spoke sharply and eagerly.

"He will pay his respects on my next visit," Brownker replied.

"'Odds my life, is this his conversion to true loyalty? But he has not recanted! Do not tell me that."

"Alas! dear Lady Susan, William has seen him. I must be wary. Precipitation would ruin everything. But I will bring my friend, and I trust with your influence and your fair daughter's——"

He stopped speaking and bowed low. In the doorway some one stood listening. She had come so quietly that Lady Susan Montgomery, who was a little deaf, did not understand why Brownker paused. Then, seeing her daughter, she laughed coarsely.

"Chide him now, Marie, chide him soundly. He has broken his word again, this loving friend of yours,

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and come alone. 'Odds my life, I guess he's jealous of poor Hugh. Confess, master, that Hugh is handsomer than you."

"Far handsomer," he sighed.

Her ladyship clapped her hands.

"Call me a witch then—I'll not deny it. Ha, ha, ha! But I have found you out, old fox. You fear a younger rival."

"Your ladyship shall now see an earnest of your nephew's homage and my good intentions." He put his hand to his breast, at which the Lady Susan's eyes glistened and her breath came quickly. When he took out a pocket-book, and from the book took a sheet of paper, she cried feverishly:

"That is a bill of money! Good nephew Hugh, a rebel and heretic he may be, but a lad of feeling—true feeling—and affection."

Brownker unfolded the bill very slowly.

"One hundred pounds, madam, which——"

Lady Susan did not wait for further words, but snatched hungrily at the bill. Another hand, however, was before hers.

"You mistake, mother," said a deep contralto voice, "it's for the King."

Marie Montgomery took the bill as she spoke, and placed it in her dress. Her ladyship stamped her foot with rage.

"You thief, you ingrate. You unnatural beast, you—give me the money. Karl, it is mine; take it from her. Use violence with her, do what you will to her, but get me that money—the money—the money!"

Her voice rose to a scream, while the girl stood perfectly still, calm and contemptuous, and Brownker observed both faces watchfully.

"I hold the money for his Majesty to save it from

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being lost at ombre," the girl said in a cold, monotonous voice.

"You lie, you!" Lady Susan cried viciously. "You hold it to spend on yourself, while your mother goes beggared, starved, naked. Oh, that I were strong enough to beat you—wretch!"

"Mother, control yourself—at least before a stranger."

"Stranger! Ha, ha, ha! Karl a stranger! You hussy, do you think I don't know that though you pretend to my face to treat him like a queen, behind my back you——"

"Your ladyship must calm yourself."

Brownker spoke in a tone which admitted of no contradiction. "The money is for King James," he went on, "and Mistress Marie, as his Majesty's agent, must keep it. But I have a private gift for you."

He took a purse and placed ten guineas in her hand.

"And now, dearest lady, I have matters of state importance to discuss with your daughter. I beg you will withdraw. I ask the favour in the martyr's name." He bowed to another portrait on the wall, a portrait of Charles I.

The Lady Susan's face, which had been forbidding enough, changed its expression at once at the chink of the money.

"In the name of that dear saint," she cried fervently, "you may ask me anything. I will leave you. But you will come again and bring my nephew. Promise."

"I promise, on my honour, madam."

He had led her to the door. Now he kissed her hand and laid his own upon his heart.

"You will trust me?"

"With my life," she said tremulously. "You hold it, Karl, and hers, and all we have, within your hands."

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We could not have lived but for your bounty and your loyalty to our most gracious master. 'Odds my life, I do trust you absolutely." She curtsied to him and left the room.

Karl, with the impatient sigh of one who has listened to a sermon, shut the door and locked it.

"That was well done," he said in a light mocking tone, "though it has cost ten guineas."

"The guineas are not yours."

"Indeed, no."

"My cousin's?"

"And my friend."

"Your victim."

Brownker came slowly towards her, then sat down upon a couch and leant back lazily.

"Why are you cross to-day?"

"I am always cross now."

"You do not always receive a hundred pounds."

"That will not so much as pay my card debts."

"I wonder why," said Karl pensively, "ladies with such slender means lose such large sums at cards."

"Why do men get drunk? Why do you look at me to-day with a devil's leer? Why has every one a temptation he cannot resist? Worst of all, why does the time come when we suddenly hate ourselves for it, when we could kill ourselves with shame, when we—O God! Karl, why did I ever let you come within this house?" She covered her face with her hands as if to shut out the smile with which he was regarding her.

Karl comfortably crossed his legs.

"Because I gave you what you needed, money; and her ladyship, your mother, money, together with a pretended loyalty to a pretending king. My faith, madam, you carry matters very high with your poor

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mother. She would turn me out, did she deem me a traitor to King James. But with you I have had no need to pretend the least. So long as I had but love to offer you, you scorned me, but since money has glistened in my hand you have refused me nothing."

"How well it becomes you to be my judge!"

"As well as it becomes your complexion to be angry, and that is marvellously. When next your portrait is attempted—if you will take my advice—get angry before every sitting. The man will then paint you a picture, and a very handsome one."

He laughed, showing all his teeth. Yet he meant what he said. Standing there in the bright morning light Marie Montgomery was a picture of form and colour such as the greatest artist living might have longed to paint. She had rich auburn hair, a complexion pure and spotless; gray eyes that languished, shone, or flashed responsive to her mood, and a figure perfect in proportion, if a trifle full—large, commanding—the incarnation of sensuous grace and symmetry.

Her eyes were flashing now, her bosom heaving.

"You fiend!" she hissed. "You devil! Is it not enough to bring me down to this, but you must taunt and torture me as well!"

Brownker raised his head from the indolent attitude he had assumed with a look of genuine surprise.

"Since I have had the honour of your friendship, madam, I have never known you despise a compliment."

"A blow would be the lesser insult from such a one as you."

Brownker looked at her fixedly a moment. Then his manner changed.



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"Come here!" he said, pointing to the couch beside him. He spoke as a master speaks to a dog that has been disobedient.

She did not move.

"Give me your hand."

She placed both behind her back.

He rose from the couch, as a cat rises to spring upon a mouse. But at the motion Marie stepped back and seized a bell-rope.

"Touch me, and Patrick shall throw you out of window."

They looked at each other with parted lips, like two animals.

"The reason for this madness?" Brownker said at last. "Quick, or it will be too late."

She gave a mocking laugh.

"What, you threaten a Montgomery! How stupid you have grown! Cousin Hugh taught you better manners at the St. James's Club."

"Be careful," he replied in a whisper. "Your reason, I say?"

"Can you not see? I have grown tired of you."

"I see—I see all now." He turned away coolly and took a pinch of snuff.

Marie's eyes became uneasy, and the hand which grasped the bell-rope trembled; but her mouth lost nothing of its mockery and determination.

"What do you see, Sir Wizard. I will stake my soul you are lying—but tell me."

Brownker closed his snuff-box leisurely and sank back again upon the couch.

"I see—John, Earl of Marlborough."

At this name she shuddered as some creature shudders when stabbed by the hunter's knife.

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"How know you that?" she whispered. "How can you know?"

"I did not know," he said pleasantly. "It was a guess—a key thrust into a strange lock; but now, the door is open."

## CHAPTER XXII

ALL the defiance and aggressiveness in Marie's bearing disappeared.

She dropped the bell-rope and covered her face with her hands. But Brownker took no advantage of this to approach nearer to her.

"Marlborough!" he said in a thoughtful tone. "So he is my—successor?"

Marie raised her head.

"Do not compare yourself to the Earl of Marlborough."

"I do not," he replied imperturbably. "I have been faithful to one king while his lordship has sworn fealty to two, and betrayed them both."

"Liar! He gave up James only because of his religion. William dismissed him."

"Yes," said Brownker, smiling. "He received valuable information from an agent of King James."

"I have never betrayed Lord Churchill by one word."

"No," he said, "it was not you. And now, sit here, beside me."

He pointed to the couch, as he had done once before, and this time she obeyed. But he gave her no caress. Leaning forward, he simply looked steadily into her eyes. The movement had a curious effect. The muscles of her hands, which had been tightly clinched, relaxed. The hot, angry colour in her face

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died away, her whole figure drooped, until mentally and physically she seemed to have lost all strength and will.

"We will now talk," he said in a hard, even tone. "You have loved my Lord of Marlborough some long time."

"Since I was seventeen."

"You must have been very pretty at seventeen."

She gave a quick shake of the head.

"You mistake. He never loved me. It was his brother, George Churchill."

"And George?"

"Would have betrayed me. He was a handsome sailor—I a tall, forward girl, just out of convent. My mother—well, you know my mother. Even then it was cards, cards, cards, from night till morning, from morning until night, and my father was abroad. I had no one to protect me, teach, or tell me anything. I never had, and so I should have fallen like a half-fledged sparrow from a nest, but for my dear lord."

"Tell me what he did."

"What did he not? Yet it was his wife who discovered what was in the wind. I owe her that, at least. She has sharp eyes, and never loved his brother. She told my lord, and the day when George and I were to have run away together, I found at the trysting-place—his brother. I was angry, mad. You know a little of my temper. I raged like any fiend at him. But by degrees he calmed me, and with his courtesy and wisdom, and above all, his dignity and gentleness, he brought me to myself, roused in me the womanhood which had not then been poisoned by the world, and poverty, and you—and saved me from myself. Afterward, to stop all scandal, for the world had talked, my lady asked me to stay with them; and though, at



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last, she came almost to blows with me, yet she was kind in her own way, and he—I do not believe since the world began, a truer gentleman has lived than Marlborough. I loved him for it from my soul—I love him still. And now, and now”—her voice broke—“in your hands I am to be the means of luring him to ruin—death. But I will not, I will not, though you kill me. I will not.”

Her voice rose in intensity with every word, and she crouched no longer. Brownker swiftly laid his hand upon her wrist.

“You will do my bidding, as you have always done. But I do not wish Marlborough’s ruin, so you will do it willingly. Indeed, after what you say, I shall but dread that you will be too impatient for the end.”

She shook herself free, passionately. “Your end for him is the Tower—the block.”

“Ay, all that, if he will not fly to France with you.”

Marie’s eyes opened to the fullest width; a dark spot of colour flashed into both her cheeks, and her teeth closed.

“You do not mean that. You are playing with me?”

He smiled gently.

“Do I ever play with fire? I am in earnest, on my word.”

“That was why you made me write to him?” she cried eagerly. “Oh, you are deep, deep! But”—with a catch of the breath—“I do not believe your word. When did you keep your word to a woman? You will make a decoy of me; use me to your ends, and then——”

Brownker held up one finger and frowned.

“Quiet! How you waste time! Of course I have my ends to serve. Marlborough in England foment



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treason and disturbance. In France he will be harmless. In France they talk and strut and threaten, but they do not act; in England they say little, but are never still. William has discovered a plot that would throw Marlborough in the Tower to-day, but he would rather put him beyond sea. Knowing what I knew, or guessed, I dictated your letter to my lord. At least you are one of James's agents. Bring me his reply."

He pointed to a faded, well-used little escritoire behind her. For one instant she hesitated. The colour in her cheeks grew darker. Her hands were so tightly clinched that blue veins showed through the white skin. Her eyes, half-closed, shone now from under their long lashes with a curious gleam. But it was only for a moment. Slowly, under the look he gave her in return, her head drooped and her hands relaxed as they had done before. Yet this time after she had turned away there was a smile upon her lips. Without a word, she rose and unlocked the cabinet and brought the letter. Brownker read it quickly.

"The day after to-morrow. He wastes no time."

"Your instructions, pray."

"I have none."

She lowered her eyes.

"I am to act—on my own discretion?"

He had returned the letter to her, and she was now caressing it as it were something human.

Brownker gave a sudden harsh laugh.

"The Lord forbid!"

She set her teeth.

"You think I have none?"

He smiled, with an expressive shrug.

"I am, then, to persuade him," she said slowly, "that it is to his interest to leave England?"

"You are to offer him such proof in writing, and

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by word of mouth, that he will then and there decide to sail with you to France."

"This may be impossible."

"In that case," Brownker rose with a polite bow, "I will see another lady with whom my Lord Marlborough is acquainted."

"Tell me what to do," she said quietly. "I will do anything you wish."

A curious change had come over her now. Her nervous tension had gone, and with it all appearance of dread and subservience to him. Her voice was practical in tone, and business-like. Brownker observed her approvingly.

"I wish you to exercise your wit, and bind up your sentiment. Marlborough has no sentiment. He likes a pretty woman, but he loves his own skin better. You have authority from St. Germain. Use it freely. That is what will tell."

"All this has been done, but he will not stir a foot towards France."

Brownker frowned, and seemed to fall into deep thought. Marie watched him under her eye-lashes.

"Suppose," he said slowly, "Marlborough received a letter in James's hand, confirming the message you were told to give by word of mouth—how then?"

Marie shook her head.

"He knows the King's writing as he knows his own."

"Leave that to me. I say, if he saw a letter signed and sealed—what then?"

"It must convince him."

"Then he shall have it. Not to-morrow, but within a week. Tell him it is coming. Rouse his curiosity and desire. Above all, make him feel James leans on

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him, and has the power, or will have, to fulfil his promises."

A curious smile played about Marie's lips.

"I will do that."

He took up his hat and whip, eying her meditatively.

"Your discretion," he said, "has returned marvelously soon."

"You have done that," she answered quickly. "Be sure I will obey you in every word."

"Then you will help yourself to what you desire most." And he went to the door.

"When shall I report?" she asked, drooping her eyes that he might not see the satisfaction in them—and the hope.

"To-morrow evening I am going to bring your cousin here. I will tell you then."

"He knows?"

"He knows nothing, but that you are an agent from St. Germain, and Marlborough in treaty with you. It would be fatal if he knew too much."

"You wish me to be kind to Hugh?"

Brownker smiled grimly.

"Madam, he is young and well-looking. He has more money than he knows what to do with, and he is fresh as grass. Do with him as you will, and spare him not."

Marie smiled maliciously.

"A very gold-mine, then."

"Ay, for his heart is as soft as his purse is long. Yet"—Brownker pulled himself up, and his voice changed—"he is a man in spite of all—a man."

Marie, left alone, stood for some moments motionless, wrapped in thought; then she raised

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Marlborough's letter to her lips and kissed and fondled it.

"It is very soon," she whispered, smiling. "A day, a night, and then——"

But her eyes filled with tears.



## CHAPTER XXIII

JUST before noon on the day after Karl Brownker's visit to the Abbey House, Lady Susan Montgomery's Irish servant, Patrick Egan, heard the door-bell ring, and swore a round Irish oath. Pat was in a bad temper. He had entertained some friends the night before, and drunk more wine than was good for him. His mistress had not dared to speak to him this morning. He had now settled himself down to clean harness, though there were a dozen more urgent things that needed attention, and he resented this disturbance of the bell. But there was no help for it. The bell pealed a second time, and, slowly and crossly, Pat answered it. He opened the door, and saw a gentleman very plainly dressed.

"The family's out," he growled.

The visitor, Lord Marlborough, did not appear interested in this announcement. He was absorbed in a careful inspection of the speaker.

"You are looking well, sergeant."

Patrick started violently. His knees trembled, and his great round face fell. Then, with an effort, he straightened himself against the door-post and gave a military salute.

"Ye're humble sarvint, my lord. Sure, I didn't—see."

Marlborough entered the hall slowly, looking at

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the man with an interest Patrick seemed to find overwhelmingly embarrassing.

"No doubt," he rejoined. "We have both changed."

Patrick saluted a second time like a monkey that has learnt the trick. His teeth were chattering in his head, and his red face had become a ghastly yellow.

"And, sure, whin I did see your honour it was always at a distance."

Marlborough held up his finger, and Pat stopped as if he had been pricked with a rapier.

"Five years ago this month, Sergeant Murphy, I sentenced you to death by hanging—as a spy."

The man tried to speak, to tell a lie his quick wit had invented, but under Marlborough's eye he could not.

"You escaped," the earl went on, "by bribing two men. Those men were shot."

He paused a moment, and Patrick's face grew paler and more ghastly still.

"If I inform the justices——"

The man clasped his hands in an agony. "For the sake av God——" Then he stopped suddenly, for on the stairs within the house he heard a quick, light step.

"Pat!" cried Marie's voice sharply, "why do you gossip there so long?"

Then she came out into the hall, saw who it was, and blushed like a rose.

"Your lordship's pardon. I thought my servant was talking to a friend."

Marlborough smiled pleasantly at Pat, who shuddered.

"My dear madam, we are old acquaintances."

"That is a high honour for Patrick."

"He deserved a higher one." Marlborough was

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now looking at the man steadily. "But he served his King without reward, even as I have done, and now, like good comrades, we may, perhaps, serve each other."

The man caught his breath.

"Holy Mother of Heaven!" he cried. "Your lordship may count upon my life then."

"I thank you, friend," was the quiet reply, and Marlborough followed Marie upstairs.

"It is plain," Marie said, ushering him into the room above, "that Pat, like myself, is in your lordship's debt. I shall make him tell me all about it."

Marlborough smiled.

"He will not tell the truth. The Lady Susan, I trust, is in good health?"

He was wondering within himself whether she would come in, and was thankful beyond words when Marie replied that she was out for the day. There was, perhaps, some truth in a story told at the clubs, that Lady Susan had once even asked Marlborough to lend her money.

"I desired to see you, my lord," Marie was saying, "as my letter told, on business, and it was necessary we should be alone."

An excitement and nervous tension were growing upon her that made her almost breathless. But she fought them down. She would need all her nerve and wit for the task before her.

Marlborough saw her agitation, and laid it to another cause.

"I have come to you," he said with great gentleness, "on state business. But if you have any matter—any business of your own to speak of, tell me that first. Rest assured that I will do anything to aid you that lies within my power."

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Marie's nervousness died a natural death.

"You mistake me, my lord," she said. "This time the tables shall be turned. The lion once saved the mouse, and now the mouse must help the lion."

He bowed, and she saw his face grow perceptibly graver and colder.

"Pray read this," she said, in a cool, business-like tone, handing him a paper. "I think your lordship knows the hand."

Marlborough bowed, and read:

"To all whom it may concern, greeting. We do hereby declare that our trusty, well-beloved Mrs. Marie Montgomery hath our authority to treat with all persons whom God hath inclined to renew their allegiance to their lawful Sovereign.

"Witness our hand and seal.

"JAMES R.

"March, 1691."

"His Majesty, I trust," Marlborough said, handing back the paper with a bow, "enjoys good health?"

Marie smiled significantly.

"His Majesty, my lord, has not been in such good health or in such spirits since he left England as he is to-day."

"Good news, indeed," Marlborough replied. But neither his tone nor his face conveyed enthusiasm. Marie, however, was now as cool, outwardly, as her visitor.

"He has good reason to be well, for his affairs are in such posture—" She paused abruptly as if she had intended to say a great deal and then thought better of it, continuing in a different tone, "But I must deliver his Majesty's message to your lordship. 'Tell

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Lord Marlborough,' the King said, 'that his late expressions of loyalty, and remorse for past actions, have touched me to the heart, and give me full confidence in his good faith. Assure him that very soon I shall have the power to reward all good subjects and to punish traitors.' Those, my lord, were the King's own words to me."

"A most gracious message!" Marlborough cried, with apparent feeling. "May we all get our deserts and his Majesty his reward. But is this all? I understood by your letter that some service was desired of me."

Marie laughed.

"Your lordship should know his Majesty too well to doubt it. But his commands will come in writing."

"In whose hand, dear madam?"

There was the ghost of a cynical smile on Marlborough's face, and Marie's cheeks flamed.

"His Majesty's own," she said unsteadily. "At least—" She stopped herself. "I was told the matter was of such importance and such secrecy that he would trust no other."

She had regained her confidence again, and looked him frankly in the face. He bowed gravely.

"But the purport, now, of these commands. If you will be so good, tell me. I would not, if it can be helped, keep his Majesty waiting for my answer."

"Alas! my lord," she said, shaking her head with a touch of petulance more convincing than any earnestness, "I would not, if I were you, set much store by any words of mine. They can indeed use a woman at St. Germain's, and give her the hardest and most troublesome of tasks, but the secrets and full meaning of their enterprises they keep from her—if they can."



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"And if they cannot?" He smiled down upon her archly, and then, with a manner which was at once dignified and entreating, took her hand.

"Sweet friend," he said in a low voice, full of feeling, "the lion is in the net, and prays the mouse to set him free."

Marie's heart beat fast. Such an advance on his part was more than she had dared to hope for. But she did not lose her presence of mind.

"I am ready to serve you," she said tremulously, "willing beyond what I can express. It has been the dream of my life since we first met. But I feel so helpless—I am but a woman, and a weak one."

He pressed the hand he held and smiled at her.

"Weak women are not chosen for such work as yours, and if you are my friend——"

"You will believe that," she cried with sudden passion, "in spite of what any one may say, you will believe in me, my lord?"

The last words came softly and tenderly, and she drew nearer to him with a slight caressing movement. He took both her hands.

"I believe in you."

She sighed with happiness and a longing that he would do more than hold her hands. But he gently let them go now, and motioning her to a chair, sat down beside her.

"The King's commands, my friend?"

"I must not tell you much," she said hesitatingly. "But I may say it is his intention to offer you command of all the army, a dukedom, and a great estate."

"But my service," Marlborough said, with a touch

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of impatience. "The wherewithal I am to give. Pardon, dear madam, but in the King's circumstances that concerns me more than the reward."

"He will ask for a proof of your loyalty."

Marlborough raised his eyebrows.

"I have given proof."

"In words," she rejoined quickly. "But this must be an act that will convince all Europe whom your lordship owns as king."

Marlborough's face hardened.

"And bring my family to ruin, myself to exile or Tower Hill. His Majesty asks too much."

"He has much to offer."

"In words——"

"No, no, no." Her voice was low and broken. "The time has passed for words. But I may not say more—I should not say so much. Yet when the letter comes, I may say all. Until then, trust me—believe me, when I say the moment is coming very soon when you will either be a convicted traitor—or the first man in England."

She had risen in her excitement, and stood before him with her beautiful head thrown back, and her eyes flashing into his.

Marlborough was stirred. Vague whispers had already reached him that a storm was brewing in France. Nothing was certain, nothing was definite, but Marie Montgomery's words, and more especially her bearing, confirmed these rumours beyond a doubt.

He rose, also, and gazed steadily and calmly back at her flushed cheeks and trembling lips.

"My friend, be sure of this. When the moment comes of which you speak I shall not be backward. But until it comes, I must keep still. This is not luke-

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warmness, it is necessity. I trust you, as a friend, to tell my master so."

"I will, indeed," she said. Then, as he took up his hat, "You will come again?"

"On the instant when the letter comes. But until then I must, for my own safety and yours, avoid this house."

She extended her hand. He took it, bent his head, and kissed it.

"You have not told me yet about yourself," he said. "When I come next, you will?"

She pressed her hand to her heart, as if she felt a sudden pain there.

"Oh, yes. When you come next."

He closed the door carefully as he went out, and stood a moment in the passage and passed his hand over his forehead. It was damp with perspiration. At the bottom of the stairs he found Patrick Egan, who with a face of wood gave a military salute, and ushered him in silence to the front door. Just before they reached it, however, he paused, looked cautiously round, and leant forward to whisper:

"My lord."

"Ay?"

Marlborough spoke in his most tranquil tone.

Pat looked round again, and brought his great face very near to Marlborough's.

"I swore to serve ye. If I do, your lordship will not do me harm?"

"That was my bargain. Well?"

"Well, an' this. Ye've talked a deal with the young mistress. Now, did she speak of a person, any person in particular?"

"The King."

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"Oh, the King be—I mean, the Holy Mother protect the dear soul. None else?"

"No one."

"Then"—he sighed and frowned heavily—"then 't is of no consequence." And he proceeded hastily to unlatch the door. Marlborough placed his foot against it.

"Tell me whom you meant."

"Why, sure, your lordship would not know the name. 'T is such a cursed ugly name."

"The name, I say."

They looked at one another, and Pat winced.

"Your lordship will never tell——"

"The name!"

"Karl Brownker."

He looked with cunning inquiry into Marlborough's face as he said it, but the face was without expression of any kind.

"He has been here—often?"

"He's always here—the devil take him!"

"He knows your secret?"

Pat clinched his great fist.

"If he did not, there'd be one sowl more on the devil's pitchfork before he'd come within the door."

"They trust him here?"

"The Lord knows. They are in his power."

Marlborough adjusted his hat with care.

"Are they?" he said very quietly.

Patrick began to look nervous. "Sure then, an' I hope he is not a friend of your lordship's?"

Marlborough smiled, and opened the door.

"I know him," was all he said, and with a nod he walked thoughtfully away.

## CHAPTER XXIV

HUGH left the presence of the King to keep his appointment with Lord Tottenham. He found that nobleman alone, in a very bad temper.

"A pest take these ministers of state!" he cried, as Hugh entered. "Either my Lords Sydney and Nottingham last night lied to me most grossly and deliberately, or else they dare not speak to their master. In either case they should be dismissed from office—Gad's life, they should."

"My lords have offended you?" Hugh said with seeming innocence.

"Offended! Zounds! my lad, they have disappointed me. You should have been by this time with the King, if they had kept their words."

"I have but this moment left his Majesty."

Lord Tottenham expressed his surprise forcibly, and when told of Hugh's adventure and his request to Brownker to present him to the King, his face grew graver still, and did not brighten when Hugh respectfully but firmly declined to say anything of the interview with William, or of its result.

"So you are to serve the King—in England," Lord Tottenham said slowly, "and you gained the favour through the word of the King's Agent! That means you are in a leash, which you'll never slip, mark me, until you've caught a hare for them—whoever, or whatever, that hare may be."



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Hugh smiled.

"Before a hare is coursed, my lord, the hound must be unleashed. It is not then certain I shall choose to catch the hare."

But Lord Tottenham made no retort; he was considering something deeply. After a minute or two, he held out his hand.

"I bid ye good-bye, my boy," he said very briefly, "and wish you God-speed."

Hugh held the hand fast in both his own.

"I have angered you by doing this——"

But Lord Tottenham stopped him with a cheery laugh, a trifle forced.

"Zooks! How could this be, when you will not tell me what it is that you have done. Nay, nay, lad," he continued kindly, "never think that. I am a man—not a jealous woman; and if an old cock thinks he can crow best, and sneers at the cockerel, and if I who had my plans think slightly of yours, mayhap I am mistaken. At least, I'll spoil no sport. Go on, and prosper, and if misfortune comes, or doubt racks ye, for Gad's sake come to me. I am in town, and shall be for awhile. And—and—why, damme, Hugh, if we were at daggers drawn—which we are not—d'ye think anything you could say, or do, 'ud bring me to forget that you're your mother's son?"

And so saying, the earl wrung Hugh's hand again, and marched out of the room.

Hugh looked after him with moist eyes. He was not, however, much affected by his old friend's prophecy. He believed in Brownker now, and above all, he believed in the King. There was something in William's personality which attracted Hugh strongly—the simplicity and directness of his Majesty's speech; his contempt of smooth phrases; his evident liking for out-

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spokenness. That with all this his Majesty might not himself follow the straight course he approved in his subjects, did not occur to Hugh. He waited patiently all day for Brownker to come to him—or send. But Brownker did not come. Twice Hugh called at Brownker's house, but he was not at home. This made Hugh uneasy, and when the next day he called for the third time, it was in an explosive frame of mind. He received the message left with Chinnic, and, controlling his impatience as well as he could, rode a horse he had just bought until midday dinner, and then played ombre until midnight, and amused himself by losing two hundred pounds.

Karl arrived at the club punctually to the minute, and they sat down to dine at six. The best dinner had been ordered, and the finest wines, and Hugh, who had been in the saddle all day, was both hungry and thirsty. Yet, for all this, he was scarcely amiable, and Brownker, talking lightly of general subjects while they ate, saw that he had left his man in suspense too long.

The dinner over, and the waiters gone, Karl filled Hugh's glass.

"I have been delayed."

"I had given you up."

"You have not, my friend, much confidence in me."

"I judge a man by his acts. And, on my life, Brownker, when one is kept waiting—hanging by a string, without a word, for two whole days—one loses faith."

"And rightly so," Brownker said decisively. "This should not have been. But William would hardly let me from his sight, before he went to Holland. He went to-day at noon, and now"—he raised

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his glass—"I am Mr. Montgomery's humble servant to command."

He drank Hugh's health with a flourish. Hugh laughed.

"Then pray, most humble servant, instruct your master what he is to do."

"We go to-night to your aunt's house," Brownker said in a brief, business-like tone. "Information reaches me that Marlborough has been seen there in close consultation with your cousin Marie, who is an agent and spy from the court of his ex-Majesty, King James."

Hugh coughed dubiously.

"I have not seen my aunt since childhood. She wrote to my mother when I joined the army that I was never to show my face within her doors. She is the maddest Jacobite."

"It will be my privilege to-night," Brownker said pensively, "to lead an erring lamb back to the fold—you are the lamb."

Hugh stared.

"You—you—get access to this house?"

"My good friend, I am a converted instrument of evil. A viper whom William is nursing in his bosom—so Lady Susan thinks."

"I cannot play the hypocrite."

"Play what you will," Brownker said tolerantly, "but gain your purpose, which must be a footing in that house. Marlborough has made it a second home."

"There is a front door to every house, as well as a back door."

"I have unlocked both for you, my friend."

Hugh sipped his wine without replying. It was the best of wine, but at this moment Lord Tottenham's words came into his mind and it tasted sour.

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"I am ungrateful," he said at last, with an effort. "You have done much for me. I shall need nothing, it would seem, but to make use of eyes and ears. Yet I cannot but feel bitter and uneasy. Gad, Brownker, I would sooner strike Marlborough in the face with my clenched fist than follow at his heels like this. A wolf in a sheep's skin!"

Brownker sipped his wine with an unruffled face.

"Your conscience," he said, "is marvellously made. You would prefer to see your friend commit a crime and be hanged for it rather than prevent the crime, and by patient search and waiting save the criminal."

Hugh's glass nearly dropped from his hand.

"What! Save Marlborough if he is guilty? This is something new indeed!"

Karl laughed—an indulgent, pitying laugh.

"My dear Montgomery, your pardon if I say it, but where has your mind been wandering since you became a man? You have mind and good sense as well as strength of arm—William noticed that. Why, then—forgive me—do you so seldom use it? Did you, in seriousness, intend to betray Marlborough to the King, if you found him guilty?"

He put it as a question, but received no answer. Hugh was turning his wine glass round and round, with a queer, hard look upon his face.

"If you were serious," Brownker continued, "then I can only suppose you have changed your mind concerning Isabel."

"I have not changed the least."

"But the man who brings Marlborough to justice will be loathed by her."

"I must take the risk of that."

"Your faith in Marlborough being absolute?"

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He rose from the table, looked at himself in a mirror. In this mirror he could also see Hugh's face. Hugh glanced up at him with a frown.

"I have lost some faith of late."

"You will lose more yet."

"But at least I will be honest. If Marlborough is guilty he must die."

"And Isabel?" Brownker murmured.

"Isabel must approve the justice of the act or I must lose her love."

"You expect too much of women."

"A woman expects too much of me," Hugh cried hotly, "if she would have me screen a damnable crime."

Brownker turned from the mirror and stroked his upper lip.

"On my life, Montgomery, if you were Lord Protector of England, the tyranny of Cromwell and his Ironsides would be mere mildness in comparison to yours. A man must be honest—a woman just—Heaven forbid! But come, we must to Chelsea. It is growing late."

They took horse from the club and were at the Abbey House in an hour. Hugh was now in a gentler mood. The fresh air and exercise had done him good. Moreover, he was extremely curious to see his aunt and cousin. He had no expectation of liking either of them, for his mother piously abhorred Papists, and had painted the Lady Susan in very black colours indeed. Marie he had not heard of since she was a child. All he knew of them was that they were very poor. It was therefore an immense surprise to be ushered into a drawing-room which, by candle-light, looked well-furnished and imposing, and to be greeted by a stately little old lady with the presence of a duchess. All this,



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however, was nothing to the impression made upon Hugh by Marie, dressed in a fashionable evening gown trimmed with old family lace, the family jewels in her hair, her arms and neck and shoulders dazzlingly white, her face all brightness and vivacity—such a vision of beauty as Hugh had seldom seen.

“Welcome, good nephew,” Lady Susan said, answering his low bow with a stately courtesy. “But, my God!”—she gave a little shriek—“as I am a living woman, you are your father’s image! Why have you kept away from us so long?”

The question startled Hugh, as she meant it to do, and before he could reply she went on harshly: “But I know—I know! Until very late you have been ashamed—rebel and heretic that you were! Come; speak truth now. You can if you are a Montgomery—as they say you are.”

There was a scarcely concealed sneer in the last words which nettled Hugh intensely.

“Your ladyship makes a sad mistake. I have no wish to be anything but a humble subject of our Sovereign, King William.”

“What!” Lady Susan showed all her teeth like a dog. “You dare, sir, in my house——”

“Mamma,” said a firm cool voice at her elbow, “pray introduce me to my cousin.”

There was a direct design as well as dignity and authority in Marie’s tone. Hugh saw Lady Susan look daggers at the girl, heard her sharp voice die down to an angry mutter, and then forgot her altogether.

“I have heard so much of my Cousin Hugh,” she said, “that I should have known him anywhere. Had I not been a woman I should long ago have made an

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invasion of his house. It is absurd we should not meet because of a difference in our politics."

"How know you there is such difference?" struck in Brownker, nodding significantly at Lady Susan, and bowing to the portrait on the wall. At this Hugh saw a remarkable change come over Lady Susan. She curtsied to the picture and cried brokenly, "The Lord grant him soon a safe return."

"Amen," Mr. Brownker said piously aloud, whispering to Hugh, "from Holland."

But Hugh felt a sudden pity for his deluded aunt. However mistaken, she was in earnest and had the courage of her faith. Following a sudden impulse, he went up to her.

"I assure you, madam, I desire, from my soul, the welfare of his Majesty," and this was true, in the sense he meant it.

Lady Susan beamed on him. "Then I forgive you all else, my dear. And you are welcome here. But I would say a word to you—softly—softly—in your ear," and she laid her hand upon his arm.

Marie was speaking to Karl Brownker at the moment, and Lady Susan, under cover of this, whispered the last words, and drew Hugh up to the portrait as if pointing out its qualities.

"Nephew," she went on, and now her voice was a woeful whine, "you are a rich man, and a generous one, for you are a Montgomery. Help us; we are in bitter need of money."

Her voice was low and breathless, not above a whisper, and he had to bend his head low to hear her words. These shocked him.

"Tell me your need," he began, putting his hand in his pocket. But she stopped him with a frantic gesture.

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"Don't, don't, or she will guess. She always guesses everything, and then she'd stop it. She is so proud. I am proud too, but I cannot starve, and I like your face, child. I loved your father until your mother—but she was a good woman—don't frown—don't mind my tongue. It is like an old rattle that cannot stop itself. I have not tasted meat this week. I am hungry. Turn this way, and seem to be looking at the portrait; now take your money out. I need only a little—just a little. Oh, I am so poor! As I am a living woman, there is not a penny in the house."

Her voice broke off in a low wail. Out came Hugh's purse in a moment.

"Why, then, take this, aunt, though it is not much. I had not an idea you were in such bitter want."

Her eyes glittered and her fingers closed upon the gold. "Fifty pounds! You are a jewel, my dear," she cried. "Your father's very image before his wife—But now, see, they are watching us." She began to speak aloud. "Indeed, nephew, it may be a coincidence, but as I'm a living woman, you have a strong likeness to our late most gracious Majesty King Charles. Ha, ha, ha!" She suddenly began to laugh. "Why, I had forgot he was so well acquainted with your parents. Sure, now, if right were right, and the crown had gone to next of blood, my Mistress Marie here might have flaunted it at court to-day as the first cousin to a king—he, he, he!"

"What—a jest, mamma?" Marie said, watching Hugh's astonished and disgusted face. "It is rare, indeed, to hear you make a jest."

"Her ladyship's words," exclaimed Hugh, "are quite beyond a jest. If my mother's name is to be so treated in this house I leave it instantly." He bowed low and made a motion towards the door.

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Lady Susan tapped Hugh coquettishly with her fan.

"'Odds my life, nephew, what a Montgomery you are! All on fire at one poor hasty word. La! I will crave forgiveness and make amplest amend. Your mother was the soul of virtue. At least she should have been; she tolerated no one who was not."

She made him a low courtesy. Hugh was not mollified in the least, and in his disgust proceeded to make an excuse to take his leave when Marie, with an interchange of glances with Karl Brownker, said decidedly:

"Mamma, I need Hugh's counsel on a matter of the utmost importance, and Karl here has a word to say to you. Please you retire a little and leave Hugh alone with me."

Lady Susan tossed her head, concealing in the folds of her skirt the purse she had received from Hugh.

"Heyday! Listen to this; what are the girls coming to! But I mind it not with so discreet a daughter and so virtuous a gentleman. Behave you, Sir nephew, see that you behave! But, of a truth, there's small use in asking, seeing that you are both Montgomerys together. I wash my hands of ye."

She leered and nodded at them like an old witch, and then, taking Karl Brownker's arm, sidled off to the door. "I will give you ten minutes, children," she cried. "Only ten minutes, and do not let us find you on our return sitting near together; that would never do. Why, there'd be a duel on it—eh, Karl? He, he, he! And a funeral in the morning from the garden gate!"



## CHAPTER XXV

MARIE received her mother's parting words with a laugh that jarred upon Hugh's nerves.

"Thank Heaven we are rid of them!"

She swept across the room to the couch. "Come here, Cousin Hugh, away from the door, and talk to me."

Her manner was gracious but dictatorial. Hugh was half amused, half indignant.

"Tell me why you have come here, please?" Her tone was still imperious, but her eyes beseeched him.

Hugh looked at her and considered. He admired her beauty, but he was not attracted by her manner.

"I have come with Mr. Brownker," he said, "and for the same reason."

"That is not true."

"Your pardon, cousin."

"I say, sir, it is not true," she repeated. "I know, if you do not, that Karl Brownker is here simply to spy. Now, tell me your business."

"My fair cousin," Hugh replied sharply, "if you think to pump me in this manner you are on a very fruitless errand. I shall say not a word except in Mr. Brownker's presence."

Her lip curled scornfully. "I would not believe Karl Brownker on his oath."

"Yet but a minute since you and he were exchange-



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ing confidences. Upon my life you must think me a very fool."

He made a movement to rise from the couch, but quick as thought she laid a hand upon his, and held it.

"Your pardon—your pardon!" she cried brokenly. "Indeed, I hardly know what I am saying. I am so distraught and desperate and miserable. Hugh"—she fell on her knees before him—"save me, for the Lord's sake, save me from that man!"

She was sobbing now wildly; her face was pale and drawn, a picture of beauty in distress.

A lump rose in Hugh's throat and his face burned. He raised the weeping girl from the ground and placed her on the couch beside him; and then, as she still sobbed, tried awkwardly to soothe her.

"Cousin Marie, my dear cousin"—he took her hand—"come, compose yourself.—Deuce take her!"—this to himself. "Come, stop to tell me your trouble. If I can serve you, depend on it, I will. What has Karl Brownker done?"

He had taken her hand into both his own now, at which her sobs quickly subsided and a very pretty handkerchief which she had whipped out was now thrust away, much as a workman throws down a tool which has done its work. Then she edged away from him a few inches, and her eyes, which were full of gratitude and wonder, drooped bashfully behind those long lashes; but she allowed him to keep her hand.

"Pardon my weakness! And we have known each other only a few minutes. Yet we are cousins, dear Hugh"—here she pressed his hand. "Ever since the day you struck down that coward—whom no other man dared even to dispute—for his foul slander on the Earl of Marlborough, I have been proud to think we were related; I have longed every day to meet you."

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She pressed his hand again and flashed a glance of admiration from her brilliant eyes which would have turned the head of many an older man. But Hugh did not feel it at the moment, for his mind was full of something else.

"I thank you," he said gravely. "But I am not proud of that adventure; nor is my friend to be called a coward. You cannot know that at the duel afterward he spared my life."

"With what object?" she cried, with a touch of her former tone. "My word, cousin, I do not wish to think you are a fool, but one who trusts Karl Brownker——"

"Will not listen to an empty slander on his name, cousin, even from a woman."

He dropped her hand, and his voice had a ring in it which quelled her instantly.

"You are right, Hugh," she said humbly. "I spoke of what I heard, not of what I knew; that was unjust. Indeed, since he is your friend"—she sighed drearily—"I had best not tell you even what I know, or I may lose you, the only person—the only man—in all the world I have to trust."

Her voice became lower and lower until it dropped to a whisper. Hugh was much touched, and he took her hand again and pressed it.

"Nonsense," he said cheerfully. "Why, such as you, Marie, must have a score of friends. But I am your cousin, therefore more than friend. Come, tell me all, my dear."

He drew her towards him as he might have caressed a child that had appealed for his protection. But his face was flushed, for he felt the power of her beauty through and through. Yet so far he was thinking of her, not of himself; thinking how forlorn and

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lonely she seemed, and that they were of the same blood. It was his duty as well as his inclination to be her confidant, protector, and especial friend.

And Marie, while she sighed and thanked him with a look as innocently surprised and grateful as if she were a girl in her first teens, followed the workings of his mind exactly.

"I cannot tell you all," she said in a low voice, sliding a little nearer to him. "It would make you too angry. I am afraid of you, Hugh."

That was admirably done, and when she sighed and gave a little shiver he began to stroke her hair.

"Foolish little cousin, I am mild as milk."

"With those you love," she murmured; "but if you are offended, roused, you are a lion. Do you think I have not heard?"

He laughed consciously. "You hear great nonsense. I am no more a lion than any other man. Pish!"

She looked into his face searchingly, bent her beautiful head, and kissed his hand.

"Hugh, you are the bravest and the most modest man I ever saw."

His face was scarlet now and she felt him tremble.

"Then you have seen few men," he said hoarsely. "But come, pray tell me how I can assist you." The situation was becoming more than he could bear, and his voice was strained. Marie herself was flushed now, and in her eyes was a gleam of mischief, which, with the touch of her lips on his hand, caused a sudden intensity of passion to spring up in Hugh. He began to say to himself now that as his only relative she was nearer than most cousins, and dearer. And yet, even while he told himself this and believed it, and allowed his arm, which seemed to move of its own voli-

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tion, to slip about her waist, something at the back of his mind protested and held him still under some control.

"Now, tell me all," he said shortly. They were very close together, and her eyes gleamed into his—her breath was on his face.

"I do not know that I should allow this," she murmured, pillowing her head on his shoulder. Then raising her lips invitingly, secure in her power, "Oh, faithless! pledged to Mistress Isabel Fretchville!"

She was thinking dreamily what a fine strong man he was, an altogether satisfactory man, and with half-closed eyes was luxuriously awaiting the denial and the kiss that would greet her words, when to her astonishment she felt him stiffen, withdraw his arm, relinquish her hand, and rise hastily to his feet.

"I thank you for that," he said in a low tone. Then, after a momentary pause in which he seemed to think deeply, "You must not, however, be under a mistake. Mistress Fretchville and I are not pledged to each other. I did offer all and would offer it again. But she refused it."

"Then, on my soul, good Hugh," Marie exclaimed, scorn, annoyance, pique struggling for the mastery in her voice, "I do not understand you in the least. Not that I do not thank you, too, for the lesson taught to me. My word, you degenerate! Poor fellow! poor little boy—ugh, a pest on you! Karl Brownker is worth a score of such a one!"

She seized two cushions which had fallen from the couch, and beat them into place with fury. Meanwhile Hugh had been growing calmer as she became excited. He greeted her last words with a quiet laugh.

"So, so. This demon in a human shape then, from whom I was to save you, is worth something after

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all. Oh, cousin, cousin, you have betrayed yourself indeed!"

At these words, Marie's face became livid with passion and sudden bitter dread.

"You lie—you lie!" she cried, stamping her foot. "And Brownker lies! I am as proud as you, Sir Hugh, with all your money and your virtue and—ha, ha, ha!—your constancy to the sweet Mistress Isabel. If Brownker has dared to say that I—that he and I have been familiar——"

"Stop!" Hugh's voice burst into the midst of hers like the roar of a big gun into the snap of the Maxims. "Think you that he—or any man—would say *that* and live after? Good Gad! you must indeed think meanly of me then."

She shrugged her shoulders, but grew quiet at once, breathing more freely.

"I knew not what to think of what you said."

"I said you had betrayed yourself. I meant you had shown clearly that your rage against Karl Brownker was more than half pretence. I meant no more. But now I shall require you to tell me much more—namely, the exact relationship between you and this man—what it has been, and is, and is to be."

Marie tossed her head.

"A likely thing! My word! Who are you, sir, to be my confessor?"

"Your only male relative, madam," he answered, "and the head of the family. You refuse to tell me?"

He paused for a reply, and she nodded curtly.

"Then Mr. Brownker shall."

Marie laughed. "He had to spare your life once, little boy!"

"And he is my friend," Hugh rejoined calmly. "But if he were my brother, he should not bring



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our name into disgrace. Nay, nor, for his own sake, shall he lie under the suspicion of tampering with your honour."

He walked across the room to the door, but Marie called him hurriedly by name, and he paused.

"Hugh, Hugh, you must not. I will do anything, tell you anything, but do not go to him."

Hugh came slowly back again. "Well?"

She laughed hysterically and pretended to shudder.

"If you stand so, cousin, I shall at once fall on my knees, as before an executioner. You frighten me to death. Come, sit you once more and I will be good—I will indeed be good."

He did not move.

"Oh, as you will," and she made a face at him. "But the heroic pose of virtue does not become you in the least."

"I am waiting."

"You may wait."

She began to laugh, then cried a little. In truth, her nerves were considerably unhinged.

"I like to make men wait. You don't know women, Hugh. Oh, a fig for your Mistress Isabel! She is a cunning baggage, I warrant me; nay, do not look so black, man, I mean it as a compliment. She loves you all the while, I wager, but outside she's cold to draw you on. She sees you're simple, so she plays the prude. Chut! We all do; I did once with Brownker. Lud! How eager he became! But I was a fool. I did not know—my God! I did not know him."

"He was, then, once in love with you?"

Marie gave a defiant nod.

"And with a passion that such striplings as you, sir, know naught about. But I would not have him.

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Pish! Brownker was not the only one then by half a score."

"So, indeed, I should suppose."

"You do me no more than justice, then; but that—that was long ago."

Her voice fell, and her handkerchief appeared again.

"I know I was too fond of company and play. How could I be otherwise? But it did not last, for when we lost our money and came here, all my fine gentlemen deserted me—but one."

She was a different person now. Her manner was quiet, her voice had grown a little plaintive, and though she held her handkerchief within her hands her eyes were dry.

"Karl was faithful," she continued. "He was more faithful in misfortune than when we were in favour. He followed us, he waited on us; found us the house, provided for us, and now he is our master."

"That means—what? Tell me all."

Hugh's voice was sharp and fierce. Its tone made Marie's eyes kindle again, yet she could not meet his glance.

"Pish, cousin, how swift you are! I mean but this—that I, who am an agent of his Majesty King James, live with my mother on the bounty of King William."

Hugh recoiled.

"A spy! You—a Montgomery—are double traitor—betraying for money William to St. Germain's, James to William. Oh, my God!"

Marie looked at him with a calm, pitying smile.

"Poor boy! I was afraid the news would be a shock. My dear cousin, there is not a man of any consideration in the land that is not doing the same, or a woman either."

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He made no answer, nor did he look at her. His teeth were set, his eyes were on the ground.

"I see," he said half to himself, half to her. "I see his plan: this house is a trap; your mother, with her old-world loyalty, a bait; and you——"

He raised his head and looked her in the face.

"Is Karl Brownker the only gentleman that comes to see you here?"

He saw her start, he saw a rush of hot colour crowd into her face, and before she could reply he added:

"The Earl of Marlborough, also, is a friend of yours."

A change, swift and complete, both in bearing and countenance, came over Marie now. She rose from the couch and stood before him as erect and queenly as he had seen her first. It is true her cheeks were burning, and her eyes shone with a soft light, but there was no confusion, no affectation, no fear.

"The earl," she said proudly, "has of a surety done me the honour of consulting me upon a matter of politics. What then?"

Hugh breathed heavily and clinched his hands.

"Politics!" he cried. "Was it for politics alone that he consulted you?"

She shrugged her shoulders slightly, not moving otherwise, and glared at him with a splendid scorn.

"I had heard, Cousin Hugh, that you were well acquainted with the Earl of Marlborough. I begin to doubt whether this can be true. Those who know his lordship well know that he is the soul of honour and of chivalry. It is this which makes his friendship so great a privilege to me."

Hugh's face slowly cleared.

"Your pardon, cousin," he said gravely. "But this politics——"

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"Pooh!" she said, drooping her eyes but watching him behind the lashes. "A matter of business. I have a letter from his Majesty King James directed to my lord, and I sent to him to tell him so. He came concerning it. When the blessed day arrives that this Dutch William and his brood of Flemish rats are swept into the sea, the Earl of Marlborough will be his Majesty's right hand."

"This cannot be true." Hugh spoke slowly, painfully.

"What, sir!" cried Marie with well-simulated offence. "You dare to doubt my word! You want a proof?"

"I will not doubt Lord Marlborough's loyalty without a proof."

"His loyalty!" Marie retorted. "That shall be proved to the hilt, cousin. You shall with your own eyes see that he is an honoured, trusted servant of King James."

She went to her escritoire and drew a paper from it, a large, important-looking letter with the royal seal.

"Read for yourself. I do not ask you to believe my words."

Hugh seized it without ceremony, and when he saw the writing gnawed his lip. It was in James's hand, addressed to Marlborough. The letter was not long, but it took Hugh some time to read it. When he had finished he felt as if his heart were dead and cold. Marlborough was found out—condemned beyond redemption. He examined the letter, the seal, the signature. Everything corresponded. There was no doubt. He felt a touch upon his arm and found Marie was standing close beside him.

"Well, what now?" Her voice was well con-

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trolled, but there was a curious apprehension in her eyes. "What think you?"

"He is guilty."

"Guilty!" she laughed shortly.

"Guilty of high treason."

"You mean to William."

"The King. There is only one."

She took the letter from him hastily.

"And what then shall you do about it—what?"

Hugh had opened his mouth to reply and Marie bent her head to listen. But the door opened at this moment and Hugh stopped himself.

"Do?" Hugh said guardedly. "That depends on many things. But my lord had better secure his person from the agents of the King."

Marie smiled.

"In that we agree. Mamma, my cousin is a most properly converted man."



## CHAPTER XXVI

It was near the hour of noon on the fifth of May. In the Abbey House, Chelsea, Marie Montgomery sat writing by the window, alone in the place except for the faithful Patrick, waiting for Marlborough.

A week had gone by since Hugh and Karl Browner had spent their evening there, the most anxious, wearing week in Marie's life. Day and night she had thought, planned, and worked. Scarcely twelve hours would pass without the arrival of a messenger from France, who brought instructions, received reports, and then slipped away to other places. Nor were messengers and intelligencers Marie's only visitors. Men known in every European court to be the counsellors of William called on her under assumed names to receive and send messages to James. The atmosphere fairly reeked with intrigue, suspense, and excitement. And in the centre of it all, holding the reins firmly, moving among noblemen, knights, and commoners, as queen and mistress of the situation, was Marie, in her element.

Late nights and laborious days seemed to leave no mark upon her beauty, her spirits, or her energy. Every evening she received her guests with the same vivacity, tickled their ears with news and messages from the King, dragged or coaxed from them promises of assistance and sometimes even hard cash; and, without betraying any definite particulars, made all under-

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stand that a great crisis was at hand, and for those who wished to save their necks from the anger of an injured King, returning triumphant to his own, it was now or never.

Lady Susan had departed for France with the money she received from Hugh. Marie was to follow at her own time. No one but herself, however, and Karl Brownker, knew that this was to be with Marlborough. It was not even whispered that Marlborough came here.

The sun bathed her in its light as she sat at the window until she looked like some rosy goddess. Her auburn hair shone like spun gold, and her face, pale with late hours, had a touch of etherealness about it that gave it more than ordinary charm.

When the time wanted five minutes to the hour she rose and put her writing things away.

"He is never late," she said to herself, "and I must prepare—prepare."

Clang! the bell resounded hollow and sepulchral through the empty house, followed by Patrick's heavy footstep. Then came the murmur of voices, a tread upon the stair, and Marlborough stood before her.

As they greeted each other Marie was shocked to see severe traces of suffering and anxiety on his face. It was as calm as usual, but thin and white and worn.

"The letter has come?"

He spoke in a quiet tone, but with a slight abruptness remarkable for him. No compliments, no graceful courtesy. Only one brief, pointed question.

Marie, falling at once into his mood, made no reply, but opening her escritoire, took out the packet she had shown to Hugh. As Marlborough opened it,

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she sank into a chair oppressed by a sudden trembling of the limbs.

A minute passed in a silence broken only by Marie's quick breathing. Her hands were clutching the arms of her chair; her eyes fixed upon his face. He read the letter slowly through and looked at her.

"The King's Majesty," he said in a slow, measured tone, "writes most graciously and to the purpose. But the course he would urge on me—to fly to him in France—is very desperate."

Marie's lips were almost colourless, and her face was white as a sheet, but she answered readily enough.

"The juncture is desperate—for the rebels."

"Wherefore, dear madam," and now his words came with an increasing sternness. "A man whose life is at the mercy of these rebels must think well before he leaps."

He seemed to refer it as a question, but all she could say was to repeat his words.

"Your lordship must think well."

Something filled her with a vague alarm. It was not exactly the expression of his face, which was composed; nor his voice, which was quiet and controlled; and yet, in part, it was both, and she was frightened—frightened to death.

"I thank you," he went on, "but I need more aid from you than that." He paused, and Marie counted the beating of her heart. "I need the truth."

She was staring at him now like a person mesmerized, her eyes slowly dilating.

"I will tell the truth."

He bowed and took snuff, watching her the while not unkindly, but with a fixity and a penetration that was almost hypnotism.

"This letter—who wrote it?"

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She sighed and her lips closed, then opened again to speak.

"One Robert Young."

"Under the instruction of Karl Brownker, whom you serve."

Her face quivered in an agony, but she did not pause.

"Whom I have to serve."

"It is his intention I should publish to the world that I am a follower of King James."

"Yes."

"And he would banish me to France, that my family and my estate might be at his master's mercy and his own."

"No, no."

She spoke sharply, vehemently, and a slight tinge of colour came into her face, as of a person recovering consciousness. "You are to be seized when you reach the coast, and thrown into the Tower."

"He gives you his confidence, you think?"

"No more than suits his purpose. But I have set spies on him, and found this out."

"What is your plan?"

"To tell you all I know, my lord, and then to do whatever you command."

Marie was herself again now. Colour, movement, and animation had returned to her in fullest measure. She was confident, full of vigour, yet charmingly submissive and obedient, and her face and bearing bore an impress of devotion to him few men could have resisted.

Marlborough looked at her meditatively.

"Your plan, pray, in detail," he said, "if I may make so bold."

His tone was chilly and doubtful. But Marie, with

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her full vitality returned to her, was not in the least discouraged or abashed.

"It is a simple one, easily carried out. You will go to France before your enemies expect. I will mislead them, never fear for that. In France the King will receive your lordship open-armed, and in a short space—the shortest—you will return here to be the greatest man in England."

"King James," Marlborough said coldly, "has much to do, I fear, before he can return to England."

"It is done, my lord."

Marlborough gave an impatient sigh.

"My good madam," he said, "such words may mean something in St. Germain's."

"St. Germain's!" she cried. "Nay, my lord, La Hogue!"

This word, and the way the word was spoken, arrested Marlborough's attention. His quiet manner vanished and the penetrating intensity of glance which had been in his eyes when he questioned her about the bogus letter, came back.

"La Hogue is on the coast. If the King is at the coast——"

But Marie made a vehement demonstration of her hands and he paused. She had turned away, biting her fingers as if in some bitter doubt and indecision.

"Merciful God!" she cried, wringing her hands. "I have broken my vow—and I swore upon the Cross. We all did—and none but me has so much as whispered it. I am lost—lost, body and soul. Holy Mother, have mercy upon me—have mercy!"

She fell upon her knees before a crucifix placed in a corner of the room—a corner in which the dust and cobwebs had gathered—and sobbed unrestrainedly.

For the moment she forgot even Marlborough.



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She was trying to pray, but her throat was too choked and dry; and her eyes, through their scalding tears, saw the old priest in the chapel at St. Germain's as he administered the oath of secrecy the day before she left for England. The exiled King, whom she loved after a fashion, had blessed her when she went away, and from the bottom of her heart she had vowed to keep inviolate the secret, which if kept until the moment came for action would win him back his crown, and to his followers the highest places in the land.

For some minutes Marie knelt sobbing, while Marlborough, standing near her, thought swiftly. At last he laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder.

"My child, you need not grieve. You have told me nothing I did not know before."

She started and rose to her feet.

"You mean that you have heard——" She paused.

"I mean," he replied, "that you must keep your vow."

"How can you know? Who can have told——"

"Hush! I will tell you what I know." He took her hand and stroked it as he had once stroked Isabel's, as a doctor holds his patient's pulse.

"King Louis has resolved to act at last, and will strike now, while William is in Holland."

"Yes, yes."

"Yes," he went on, "and at La Hogue is an army and the fleet ready."

"Twenty thousand men!" she cried, containing herself no longer. "Twenty thousand veteran soldiers! In England for William there are barely five thousand, and these scattered."

Marlborough smiled wanly.

"King Louis has laid his plans well." His face

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was perfectly calm, and his hand, firm, soft, caressing, drew her nearer to him.

"You trust me, child?"

She nestled close until she brushed his shoulder with her hair.

"With my honour and my life."

He started, but the movement was so slight she did not notice it. She only saw that though his face was white as marble, and as hard, there was a feverish light in his eyes, and her heart beat fast and joyfully.

"Tell me, my child, when does the King come over?"

"The moment that the wind blows from the west. The fleet is equipped, the ships are full of men. But I wonder"—she paused and looked up with a searching glance—"I wonder still how you could have known."

He stooped and kissed her on the forehead, and her heart glowed within her. Yet she noticed and remembered afterward that his lips were cold.

"At least," he said, "it was not you that betrayed."

She gave a sudden happy laugh.

"I care not now the least what I betray to you."

He pressed her hand.

"Tell all then. King James wants me, though he did not write a letter?"

She became grave at once.

"Oh, have faith in me, my lord, now. I beseech you keep faith. I will own it all. Karl Brownker proposed the letter should be writ and I acquiesced to humour him, never intending really to plant the hoax on you. But when I saw the letter it was so wonderfully done, and so answered the purpose in my mind to draw you away to France, that I fell in with the roguery. It was wrong, I own, most wrong, and I

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shall be rightly served if you refuse to believe in me again, but it was not done to betray you."

Marlborough smiled indulgently.

"We all must make mistakes. But I had been warned. Then his Majesty has left no token?"

"Indeed," Marie cried, "I have a token not even Robert Young could counterfeit."

She turned away, took something from her bosom, and handed it to him. It was a little leathern bag. Marlborough opened it and took out a plain ring with a coat of arms, wrapped in a piece of dirty paper. On the inner side of the paper were these words, scrawled in a regular but shaky hand:

"For my Lord Churchill, from James."

Marie watched him and smiled proudly as he raised the ring with reverence and kissed it.

"And now, my lord?"

"God save the King!" he said and put the ring away. Then he took her hand again.

"When do you wish that I should start?"

"There is not a moment to be lost."

"To-morrow, then." He spoke as coolly, she noticed, as if he were going to make a call upon a friend. "I cannot arrange before."

"That will be soon enough, for I have told Browner the next day. Oh, I have plotted deep with him, arranging down to the last point how we shall both be caught together."

She laughed gleefully and laid her head against his shoulder. Again Marlborough started, and this time she felt it, and with a flaming face drew back. But he held her hand like a vice.

"Give me full instructions," he said.

"Come here at dusk. I will have disguises ready. Patrick, on whom we can thoroughly depend, will

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see that horses are not wanting at all convenient stages on the road, and there is a vessel at a port fifty good miles from the one I have marked down for Mr. Brownker."

"Then I may rest content," he said. "Now I must take my leave."

"So soon!" she cried.

"I have much to do before to-morrow."

"You will come early?"

"Depend on me."

"Indeed, I do with all my soul. And you, my lord, believe, now? Tell me!"

Her tone was almost prayerful in its urgency. For answer he drew her towards him and kissed her again, this time on the cheek.

"I believe wholly. Farewell."

A gust of wind blew against the window-pane. Marie turned eagerly and clasped his hands.

"See you, see you! The wind has changed to the southwest. It blows from France."

But there was no reply. Her visitor had gone.

## CHAPTER XXVII

LORD TOTTENHAM was sitting in his library alone, after his midday dinner, discussing a bottle of wine. This was a time of day when his lordship was usually in the happiest of humours. But this afternoon he was gloomy and depressed. He had been so, indeed, all the week, since Hugh stole the march upon him, and with Brownker's help held audience with the King.

Lord Tottenham was hurt; he was also keenly suspicious of Brownker's intentions; finally, he had not the smallest confidence in Hugh's discretion and judgment.

"They will toss him—hand to hand—as boys toss balls at play," he said to himself a dozen times, "and lead him blindfold to a pit. If I but knew their object, and could set Jack Marlborough on the trail! Gad's life! we'd smoke 'em! But I know nothing, and can only wait—wait—wait! A pest upon it!"

On this particular afternoon his lordship was more than usually out of humour, for he had invited Hugh to dine with him, his invitation had been accepted, and Hugh had not arrived. The earl had waited half an hour, then ordered dinner up, and found it very little to his taste.

He drank slowly a bottle of wine, and had just begun another when he heard the bell ring sharply, and the steps of his servant ushering a visitor upstairs.



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"The boy at last," he muttered, all his ill-humour vanishing. "I knew he would not fail."

The door opened, and the butler appeared, panting.

"The Earl of Marlborough, my lord."

A twinge of disappointment passed over Lord Tottenham's face, but when his friend came in he greeted him cordially.

"You, Jack! What good wind brings you here at this hour?"

Marlborough shook hands in silence. When the door closed behind the servant he answered:

"A west wind, Ned—from France."

Lord Tottenham recoiled against the table.

"France! Hell and damnation, what d'ye mean?"

Marlborough's reply was to pour himself out, and drink, a glass of wine. Lord Tottenham now perceived that he was deadly pale, and that his clothes were splashed with mud to the neck.

"There, sit ye, Jack," he said, quietly placing a chair for him. "You are worn out. Sit and rest."

Marlborough emptied a second glass, and then wiped his lips, with his usual nicety and deliberation.

"Neither you nor I, Ned, will rest to-night. If this wind holds for four-and-thirty hours, James will be at Plymouth with twenty thousand men."

Lord Tottenham gasped for breath, then gnashed his teeth in his friend's face.

"By Gad, then, the babble of the clubs was true. And you have come to laugh!"

He raised his clenched hand as if to seize Marlborough's throat. It was caught and held with a grip of iron.

"I came here, my lord, to advise you, as privy-councillor to her Majesty, to go instantly to the Sec-

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retary of State, and devise means for the protection of the coast. They have not landed yet."

Lord Tottenham's hand fell to his side.

"I believe you, Jack," he said, slowly and heavily. "I swear I thought on the instant you'd a regiment of French cuirassiers, and had taken London by surprise."

"Nay," Marlborough answered, smiling, "only Ned Tottenham. But there is no time to lose."

Lord Tottenham's answer was to pull the bell-rope till it broke. A servant appeared with a quickness which suggested that he had been listening at the key-hole.

"A horse within five minutes!" he cried; "you hear? Five minutes! 'Tis life or death!"

The man fled, and Lord Tottenham came back to where Marlborough, standing by the fire-place, was flicking his boot with a riding-whip.

"Zounds, Jack! I should crave forgiveness."

"Tut, Ned; what you have said to-day all London will confirm to-morrow."

"Then all London will most damnably lie! And, by the Lord, I will declare at the Council, to the Secretary and to the Queen, that you brought the news. To-morrow you shall command the army."

Marlborough shook his head. "If you love me, Ned, you will not breathe my name. Nay, you must swear to it."

Lord Tottenham frowned. "If I must——"

"You must."

"Then I will swear. But why I cannot see."

"Listen, old friend. A trap is laid for me. At any moment I may be seized, accused of treason, and thrown into the Tower. Now mark me well. If this comes about you may, in private, tell her Majesty,

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or the King, that I came here with this news to you. Take note of time and circumstance, and make oath upon it. But tell no one now. Indeed"—he smiled faintly—"there is no one who'd believe it."

"Nay, there is one," Lord Tottenham exclaimed. "My lad, Hugh."

Marlborough nodded.

"True, I had forgotten him, and his name reminds me of another matter. A presentiment is with me that you and I may not meet again, Ned. Remember this: that girl, Isabel Fretchville, has no protector but myself and my dear wife. Her father is a drunken sot. If my estate is confiscated, I commend her to your care and guardianship. Take her to your house—marry her to your boy; you will not find her stubborn, I'll be sworn!"

Lord Tottenham's eyes brightened, and a grim smile lurked about the corners of his mouth.

"Karl Brownker, then, is not in favour."

Marlborough looked straight into his friend's eyes.

"Karl Brownker, Ned, has laid this trap for me. He has drawn, and thrown away the scabbard. Haste! There are the horses."

There was a clatter outside, and then the sound of feet running upstairs, and Ben, Lord Tottenham's favourite groom, opening the door without knocking, saluted with a stolid face. "All ready, my lord."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when some one entered behind him.

"Hugh!" exclaimed Lord Tottenham. "'Odds-bub, boy, you have come in the very nick."

But at this Marlborough shook his head.

Hugh pressed Lord Tottenham's hand, and then, turning to Marlborough, saluted him with a face so

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grim and forbidding that a sudden suspicion seized Lord Tottenham, and held him almost breathless.

"My Lord of Marlborough, Hugh," he said, watching Hugh's face keenly, "has brought good news. You have his full permission to ride to St. Albans when you will."

Hugh responded with a formal bow.

"My service to his lordship. But I wish a word with you, my lord, before you leave the house."

Lord Tottenham shot a glance at Marlborough, who nodded back.

"I am going, Ned," he said, "you will recollect there is no time to lose."

He turned to leave the room, upon which Hugh raised his hand as if he would have stopped him. He dropped it instantly, on second thought, but Marlborough saw the gesture and turned back.

"Your groom, Ned, is needed below stairs."

Ben looked at his master and left the room.

"Montgomery, I know, is loyal," Marlborough went on curtly. "I have pleasure in taking him into our confidence. Sir, I have just informed my Lord Tottenham that I have discovered this day that the French fleet sails for England with twenty thousand men at the first fair wind. You have come perhaps to confirm my words."

Hugh stared from one to the other in utter bewilderment.

"Great heavens! My lord, I know nothing of it."

"Then, Ned," Marlborough said, smiling, "they have kept their secret fast—and there is time. A good-night, both."

He bowed and left the room.

Hugh turned upon Lord Tottenham.

"This news was brought by—by—the earl?"

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Lord Tottenham was now dragging on his riding boots.

"By no one else. Wherefore to Lord Marlborough we shall owe the safety of the country—if it can be saved.—Ben!" The groom came back. "In what direction lays the wind?"

"It has changed, my lord."

"The devil seize you," roared his master; "changed to what?"

"It blows due east, my lord."

"God be praised! Let it but hold so another day and night, and with Marlborough at the coast in full command— They shall give him full command if I can compass it——"

"The Lord forbid!" Hugh exclaimed passionately.

Lord Tottenham stared, then he stamped his foot.

"Ben, get you out.—Now, lad," as the groom departed, "there is something in your gizzard touching Marlborough. Bring it out."

"I came to tell you. I have seen evidence that proves beyond denial Marlborough to be in league with James, planning the capture of the Queen."

Lord Tottenham's face became livid to the lips.

"Who stuffed you with such lies?"

"It is no lie!" Hugh said angrily; "a paper setting all this forth was shown me, signed by his name, and I have since seen a letter writ by James to him confirming all."

"What—what—what!" groaned the other; "you, Margaret's child, have been playing spy! Oh, my God, this is bitterest of all."

"For Heaven's sake, sir," Hugh cried, now fairly beside himself, "take not that tone with me, or I shall say what we shall neither afterward forgive. I have been no spy, but have gained honestly certain knowl-



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edge of the most damnable and cold-blooded plot that ever was devised. I have this moment learned that Marlborough has agreed to fly to France himself in two days' time. What think you of that?"

"You have heard this from whom?"

"I know it to be truth."

"And I know that it's a lie!"

"I wish it might be. But on my soul, I have proved it truth."

"So you say, and may think. Ay, I'll believe you honest, Hugh. But, harkee: there never lived a greater dupe; you are a pawn in another's game. I see all now."

Lord Tottenham spoke with bitterness and passion.

"While you have been talking I have been thinking, boy. Now, tell me this. Who was it showed you the letter signed by Marlborough? Do I not know his name! Why, he is the most accursed villain in the land. Do I not know him, I say?"

Hugh smiled grimly.

"You know him well, my lord. It was his Majesty the King."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

MARLBOROUGH went from Lord Tottenham's direct to his wife at the residence of the Princess Anne, Berkeley House. He had not been seen there so far since he had been in London, as it was essential that his presence in town should not be publicly known; but news had come to him, just before he started for Chelsea, which sent him to the countess in hot haste as soon as that business was over.

He found Berkeley House in a state of extraordinary bustle and unrest. Servants were running up and down and whispering to one another in the passages, and three physicians who had been in attendance on her Highness were standing in the hall in hot discussion. Upon Marlborough's appearance they saluted him respectfully, and would have called him into counsel, but before the subject could be opened a servant hurried up with word that he must go to the countess instantly. He found the Lady Sarah in a small ante-room leading to the apartments of the princess. She was walking up and down, her beautiful hair dishevelled, her face scarlet with passion.

"They lied, then," she cried by way of greeting. "'T was said you were in the Tower. Thank God it was a lie; I could not have borne another moment by myself."

Marlborough went to her, smoothed back the gold-

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en hair, and gave her a long, lingering kiss, with lips that were not cold now.

"My dear heart—my soul—why do you listen to such lies? If I am seized, which may be any day, have I not promised to send you word. Tell me what is amiss here."

She straightened herself, and starting from him, paced the room again.

"If I could get that woman's face within my fingers I would tear the skin from it in strips."

"You mean?" he coughed uneasily.

"Mean, my lord! Have you grown stupid of a sudden? Whom should I mean but Mary, wife to the black pig, William? But I must tell you"—quieting down a moment—"how this woman has passed all bounds of decency and sense in her hate for me, though I have never harmed her by a word or deed!"

Marlborough sighed.

"I heard the guards had been withdrawn by order of the Queen."

"And that was bad enough! Anne, whose child is heir, and who if that boy dies will be Queen one day herself, must now live like any commoner, and all because she is my friend. . . . But there is worse since. Knowing the poor dear wishes above all things for peace and quietness and the kindness of her friends, this devilish woman has sent private word round the court that all are forbid under the pain of their Majesty's most serious displeasure to call upon or in any other wise to pay the least attention to the Princess Anne."

Marlborough looked very grave.

"If the Queen pursues her purpose we must submit at last."

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The countess turned upon him, her face in a glare of concentrated passion.

"What! My lord?" she whispered. "What! Submit! Harken to this. Though this Mary, this Pope in petticoats, plastered with texts outside, black as the pit within, strips me of every penny I possess, makes me go barefoot and in rags, she shall never force me to submit. Anne may yield. Poor soul, she is considering now, and we are to go into her presence and hear what answer she will send her sister. But if she does not, let Mary do her worst. I defy and scorn her. I will trample on her, Queen of England though she be, as long as we two live."

"The Queen, then," Marlborough said, as if he had not heard the last words, "has written to the princess. You did not tell me that."

"The most bitter, cruel letter that you ever saw. Dismiss my Lady Marlborough—the letter ran, in effect—or I will never see or speak to you again. Can spite go further, even in a pious woman?"

"The princess feels it deeply?"

"Her heart is nigh broken. That accursed cat——"

"Hush, hush!"

Marlborough spoke now in a tone he rarely used towards the Lady Sarah, and which many people believed he dared not use.

"Hush, I say. You know there are ears at every door, and tongues to repeat every word at St. James's. Besides, this is no time for passion. Our position is most critical. I have news, vital news, to which we must give thought calmly; we shall be ruined if we act in heat."

"Heat, my lord?" Sarah said in a cool and injured tone. "No one is heated that I know of, unless it is

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yourself with your poor wife. I am as cold as water"—she gave a little laugh—"after it has boiled. I defy the Queen or any of her women to say that I have been wanting in due respect or ever failed"—she paused, then continued in a louder tone—"to perform the duty of a loyal and a humble subject."

There were steps in the passage outside; the door opened, and a gentleman, attired in so tightly fitting a suit of black silk that at any violence of movement something disastrous must have happened to him, bowed stiffly twice.

"May it please your ladyship, and you, my Lord Marlborough, to attend her Royal Highness, who commands me to say that your presence is desired, and who sends——"

"Lud save us, Sir Anthony!" cried the countess, catching up her train and sweeping past him, "but I trust her Highness will not put into her business as many words as you spin out of nothing, or we shall be waiting on her all night long!"

The gentleman in waiting bridled like an angry turkey-cock at this rudeness, but a certain expression in the countess's face, as she looked at him with her head on one side, caused him to think discretion the better part of valour, and he silently led the way to the princess's closet.

In a nobly furnished room two persons were awaiting the Marlboroughs' arrival—a lady reclining on a couch, and a tall, stout gentleman in an arm-chair close by. This gentleman, Anne's husband, Prince George of Denmark, had a broad open face, dull, but frank and good-natured. He was a man of no mark, sneered at by James, despised by William, yet possessing one distinction which neither of these royal personages could lay claim to. He was a true and faithful husband, and



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Anne, in her many bitter troubles, found comfort in poor George. Though not attempting to enter upon any independent action of his own, he never submitted to dictation by the court where his wife was concerned, and he supported her loyally in all her disputes with William and Mary.

The Princess herself had a fat plain face—pale now, and drawn with suffering. There was no beauty in it, but it was the face of a kindly, well-intentioned woman, who did her best to do her duty, but frequently found the world and her own friends too much for her.

Sir Anthony opened the door with a flourish, announced the Marlboroughs, and then hastily retired.

Prince George rose to bow awkwardly to Sarah, and to shake hands with Marlborough. Anne raised herself slightly on one elbow, and smiled her greeting.

"Tell them, George," she said tremulously, taking Sarah's hand and placing it against her heart, while she held one out to Marlborough, who kissed it as if it were his Sovereign's.

"On my soul, I cannot put words to it just now."

"Her Highness," the prince said, speaking in curt, broken English, "do say she love you so, that, though people should threat to kill her, she will not part from you unless you be afraid to stay."

"And he thinks the same, my dear," the princess added. "George thinks just the same. No one, my lord, shall take my dear Mrs. Freeman from her poor, faithful Morley, except by her own wish or yours. Now pray, both of you, let me know your minds. I have made up mine."

They were kneeling before her now. Sarah, overcome for once, was weeping, and, with a rare movement of affection, caught her mistress's hand and kissed it.

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"We will stay with you, madam," she exclaimed, "always!" Then she paused. Her keen eyes scanned her friend's gentle face and the poor dull one of the prince, and she thought of the strong, cold will of the Queen, with the support behind it of William's keen, resourceful brain. Was it a fair match? What would the end of such a struggle be to her mistress? And the cause of it all was herself! A revulsion of feeling swept into her heart.

"No," she cried suddenly. "It is not right your Highness should suffer so for me. My lord"—she looked back at her husband—"tell the princess what I mean—what you said to me."

There was a hesitancy in her tone now; already she had begun to repent her generosity, but she would not draw back. There was no hesitation in Marlborough's response.

"Madam, we love your service, and you know it, but you do not know yet how much we love yourself. Were we to think for an instant of standing between you and her Majesty we should not be worthy of a thought from you. Our gracious Queen, your Sovereign and our own, commands that you dismiss us. Pray, in your reply to her, think only of your own happiness and peace. We shall never change or falter in our love or service. Far or near, in disgrace or in prosperity, we must ever be your servants, your humble but devoted followers and friends."

His voice failed a moment, and then he concluded: "Nothing, I say, can change our hearts. Do with us as you will."

All were weeping now, Prince George snuffling loudest of all, like a bear with a cold. But at Marlborough's last words, Anne raised herself from the

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couch and sat erect. Her weakness had fallen from her.

"My dears," she said, using the homely familiar term she bestowed upon her intimates, but speaking in a tone that was very strange to Lady Marlborough's ears, "there is no more to say now I know your minds. The Queen, my lord, in laying her commands on me is pleased to ask me to obey her out of consideration for her sisterly affection, but she should show that affection if she wishes me to see it. I have writ her a reply, and now I'll send it. We will never part, my lord. While poor Mrs. Morley lives you shall have her countenance, and share whatever fortune sends her even as your dear wife will have her love." She held out her hands to both, and, as they kissed them, added with a quaint smile: "I am a poor friend now, my dears, but some day I may not be quite so poor."

"And when that day comes," Marlborough exclaimed, "all we desire is that your Majesty may have cause to say that we have been as faithful in our service as you have been generous to your servants."

"Amen," echoed Lady Sarah through her tears. "Amen."

## CHAPTER XXIX

ALL afternoon after Marlborough's departure and most of the night Marie toiled to get everything in readiness for the flitting. Papers were burnt, furniture was packed away, and the few precious ornaments and other unportable household goods she still possessed were buried in the garden. Everything was done by noon of the next day, and then Marie had nothing to do but brood and plan, hope and fear. This was bad for her nerves, and Patrick, who cooked her a dainty dinner, was dismayed to find she would touch nothing. But Patrick was an old soldier. He put the dish down upon the table and gave an emphatic snort of indignation.

"So ye'll ruin all bekase the omelette is bad."

"The omelette looks very good," she said indifferently. "I have no appetite."

He sighed deeply and began buttoning up his coat.

"'Dade, then, there's no help for it," he said. "A good afternoon, mistress."

Marie looked at him in astonishment.

"Where are you going?"

"Home, to ould Ireland," was the sepulchral reply. "At least away from here as fast as me two feet will carry me."

Marie frowned. "This is all a pretence to force me to eat the thing."

"Pretence!" he cried. "Little pretence is there in

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it; as little as in your white face and tremblin' hands. No sooner will ye be on the road, now, than ye'll dhrop like wet paper, and we'll be took and hanged. Bedad, but I'd not be hanged for an omelette nor yet for a fanciful lady at all. So eat, or I'm off, mistress. Ye've had nothing, to my knowledge, for four-and-twenty hours. Oh, I'm in earnest just!"

Marie smiled and held out her hand for the plate.

"Give it to me. Your arguments are irresistible."

"Arguments, now," Pat replied with a complacent smile, "are like omelettes, ma'am. They take no time to swallow if they are well made. I'll go feed the horses."

Dusk came early, and before six the bell rang softly and Patrick saluted Marlborough in the hall.

Marlborough looked at him attentively.

"You said once, sergeant, you would do me service."

"To the hour of death, my lord."

"Then harkee: if by a mischance we separate to-night, be you answerable for your mistress's security. Guard her with your life."

The Irishman stared in surprise, and then grimly saluted.

"When I was fightin' for King William an' prayin' for King James, my lord, 'twas said your lordship never axed your men to do what ye'd not do yourself. 'Dade, that was a mistake, I'm thinkin'. But be sure of this, I'll not follow your example."

Having said which, Pat wheeled abruptly, and walked off with great strides before Marlborough could reply.

Marlborough found Marie in riding dress, with a cloak and hood thrown over a chair in readiness. Her face was bright and eager, and she came forward with



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both hands out. He took them in his own, but instead of kissing her, held her gently at arm's length.

"Sit down, my child, and let us talk."

She obeyed him, but all the colour fled from her face.

"I am come according to my promise," he said in his quietest tone. "But it is to tell you that I cannot leave my home, not even for King James."

"You have thought better of it all?"

She spoke as quietly as he, but in her face he detected the vibration of a coming storm.

"I told you yesterday," he said with slow precision, "that a man in my position must look well before he leaps. I have looked now, and find I cannot leap at all."

She sat still a moment, staring at him. All the feverish intensity which the day before lay behind his self-possession had disappeared as completely as if he had never touched her hand with his finger-tips, never called her friend, never drawn her head upon his breast.

"Oh, you betrayer!"

She hissed the words at him, springing from her chair as though she would fly at his throat. "How I hate and despise you! You are meaner, and more false, than any man I ever saw, and I have known some liars!"

"Mistress Marie——"

"Silence, or I shall forget my womanhood and strike you! Why, why did I let you fool me? What possessed me that I should be so mad! I trusted you. You, who have now betrayed all, I warrant, to my worst enemies. Oh, that I could go really mad and kill you where you stand! But I have not strength."

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"I pray you, madam, calm yourself," he said gently.

"Be silent!" she cried, stamping her foot, "and leave me." She pointed to the door.

"That is impossible; you are in danger."

She laughed shrilly.

"Oh, my lord, my lord, you do me too great honour. My danger! You mean your own."

"You do not in the least catch my meaning," he said in a grave tone. "When you are yourself——"

"A thousand thanks; I am now returning to myself. Shall I call my servant?"

Marlborough's face now grew stern.

"Come, come, madam," he exclaimed in a tone so commanding that Marie, though panting in her anger, was compelled to listen at last. "This must end at once. The step that you proposed would have been madness, as much for you as for myself. But there is another I can take, and you with me."

"With you?"

She stared at him spellbound.

"That is, if you choose to go with me," he said coldly.

"Pray tell me," she cried, "tell me; I never dreamed—I thought you were deserting me."

"No such thought came into my mind," he said reproachfully. "What I wished to tell you, had I been allowed, was that my wife, the countess, requests the honour of your company at Berkeley House to-night."

Marie leaned helplessly against a chair.

"Her ladyship!" she ejaculated. "Berkeley House—merciful heavens!"

"Our plan is this," Marlborough went on in a matter-of-fact tone, totally ignoring the obvious agitation of his companion, the alternate hope and fear,

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joy and disappointment that passed in quick succession over her face, and left it at the end almost as bewildered as at the beginning. "You have prepared for a journey in good faith, but it is a hundred chances to one that Brownker has smelt this out, and has everything arranged to seize us on the way. To elude him we must double on the track, and ride to London, not from it. You shall enter Berkeley House by a door my wife will open; a chamber is prepared for you which no one will go into but ourselves. There you will be safe, concealed even from Brownker, until the moment comes when he is harmless, and you can go to France or where you will."

Marie clasped her hands.

"A perfect plan."

"You approve it?"

"I place myself unreservedly at your disposal and her ladyship's."

"The countess," Marlborough said gravely, "has greatly taken to the notion, and will give you a warm welcome. She bade me tell you that."

"I humbly thank her ladyship."

There was the ghost of a gleam in Marie's eyes and a suspicious pursing of the lips. What else, she wondered, had the countess told him? But this she was not likely to know, which was as well, considering that Lady Sarah's last words had been: "What must be, must, and to save the house if James comes over I'd take the devil in. But bear in mind, this slut stays not a minute longer than the crisis lasts."

Marlborough took up Marie's cloak.

"Then I will give orders for the horses——"

"Nay, my lord, I had forgotten. You must see this first."

A sudden thought had struck her, and unlocking

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her cabinet she took out a letter, the only one left there.

"The original of this was shown to me for an evil purpose, but I transcribed it faithfully to give to you. This 'Association,' signed by your name, is in the possession of Karl Brownker."

Marlborough ran his eye over the paper and smiled.

"Who put this trash into your hands?"

"Need your lordship ask? Brownker."

"It is the most outrageous forgery ever devised, and the most foolish. No man with a sane mind would put his name to that."

"Your name is there, and others exact in their similitude."

He turned over the page, and saw his name and nodded.

"Master Robert Young," he said quietly.

"Ay, and he will attest to the genuineness of the document before the House of Lords, and swear he found it in a flower-pot in the house of my Lord Bishop of Rochester in Bromley by Bow."

Marlborough stroked his chin.

"Karl Brownker is indeed an admirable contriver."

"He holds by means of this a warrant for your apprehension."

"I should have heard of that before." His tone was stern and reproachful.

"Believe me," she exclaimed. "I only knew this morning of the warrant. Besides, he is too cunning to arrest you in a common way. He would catch you in flight as well. Then the cry of forgery, if raised by your friends, will not be listened to."

Marlborough stood in deep thought. Then he held the cloak towards her.

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"We must be gone. I see I shall have to travel farther than Berkeley House to-night, or be concealed there also. Come, my friend."

He threw the cloak over her shoulders and went to a fire which was dying slowly in the grate, and burnt the letter. His face was now serene and even cheerful.

"We will not wait for Patrick," he said, "but go to help him."

They had not to go far. Before they reached the door it flew open, and Patrick appeared with staring eyes and pallid face.

"Run — conceal yourselves — Holy Mother of Heaven! we're all betrayed. The garden's full of soldiers. Hearken!"

The thud of a musket-butt came against the back door and a hoarse voice cried "Open."

Marie screamed in her dismay and clung to Marlborough, while Pat, with an old soldier's instinct in the presence of an officer, stood ready to obey orders, but without an idea of his own. Marlborough pressed Marie's hand soothingly. His own bearing was that of a man receiving visitors he had expected all along.

"Lock and bolt this door," he said to Patrick with a nod. In an instant the door of the room, built of solid oak, and of immense thickness and weight, was closed and securely fastened.

"Now let us consider and feel our way. Shutters to that window, Pat."

A light was gleaming on the panes already from a lantern down below. As Pat sprang to the place and bolted the shutter down, Marlborough stirred up the fire, and taking from his pocket a piece of paper, twisted it into a small torch and lit it.

"The Lady Susan, your mother, once told me that a secret passage led from this chamber to the cellar,



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and from thence to a wood beyond the road. Where is the door?"

Marie clasped her hands.

"Where was it—where? Somewhere in the eastern wall. Yes—no—I cannot tell now—I cannot remember."

"The eastern wall," Marlborough said. "Then I will find it, if they give me time."

Steps now were heard upon the stairs. The back door had been broken open, the soldiers were in the house. Crash! A heavy blow against the parlour door, which brought plaster from the ceiling, and seemed to make the whole house shake, then another and another.

But Marlborough paid not the slightest attention to these sounds. While Marie, too terrified to speak or move, stood fascinated in the centre of the room, and Patrick, rolling curses from his chest, clutched an iron bar which he had picked up on his way from the garden, and stood near the door ready to strike down the first man who showed his face, Marlborough coolly searched and tapped with his knuckles the panels in the wall. At last he came to one that sounded hollow, and finding what he was searching for, he pressed a spring. A door, formed of four panels, most delicately cut and fitted, fell slowly back.

Splinters were now dropping from the door from the heavy blows falling on it ceaselessly, while from without the scrape of a ladder was heard at the window. Marlborough caught Marie by the hand.

"All is safe now. This leads, if I remember, to the cellars, then beneath the road into a wood."

He put his arm about her and in another moment she was in the passage behind the panelling. Marlborough touched Pat upon the shoulder and beckoned.

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A minute later the door fell in, and the soldiers entered—an empty room.

Meanwhile the three, with great circumspection and care, softly groped their way down a very narrow winding stair. Marlborough went first, Marie next, Pat bringing up the rear. The way seemed almost endless. When the door at the bottom was reached at last it took them some time to find the spring to open it, for the darkness was intense, and rust had gathered everywhere. Marlborough discovered the place at last, and after several efforts the catch gave way and the door yielded outward. Beyond was black darkness. But Marlborough, feeling his way cautiously, discovered that the door in the cellar wall was only three feet from the ground. He slid down, took Marie in his arms, and placed her beside him. Pat was following, groaning with the cramp of having for so long contracted his great body into so small a space, when there was a sharp, ominous sound—the scrape of flint and steel, and then a spark, a flare of light; a sharp agonized shriek from Marie, the whistle of steel as Marlborough drew his sword, and by the light of a torch held high at the back of the cellar they saw two soldiers presenting loaded muskets at their heads, and nearer, with rapiers drawn, Karl Brownker and Hugh Montgomery.

“My Lord of Marlborough,” Karl said in clear, resonant tones, “I arrest you for high treason in the King’s name.”

## CHAPTER XXX

THE torches shone upon a strange group in the cellar of the Abbey House. In the background the faces of the soldiers, William's guards, broad and stolid; in the centre of the room Karl and Hugh, vigilant and stern; before them Marie, her face tear-stained and distorted with terror; Patrick, sullen and dangerous; and lastly, Marlborough.

He stood in advance of Marie protectingly, his rapier drawn, but the point to the ground. The full light of the torch shone upon his face, and for a few moments it was the only face Hugh saw.

Marlborough—caught; driven into their hands like a rat from its hole, and surrounded now by every damning circumstance of guilt. Karl had triumphed indeed, and Lord Tottenham must eat his words. As for Marie, when Hugh glanced at her crouching and trembling, his soul sickened within him.

He would gladly have turned away and left them; gone home and hidden his face in bitter, unutterable shame. But now Marlborough spoke, and Hugh, gazing at him, and watching every movement, every change in the expression of his face, down to the quiver of an eyelid, forgot Marie; forgot, gradually, all that he felt when the torch first shone upon the prisoner, and at last stood fascinated, spellbound, almost ready again to believe that black was white.

Marlborough's face was not beautiful to look at,

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grimed as it was with the dirt and dust of the stairway ; his peruke full of cobwebs and tousled out of all decency. But in his bearing there was something that vividly recalled to Hugh the scene he had once described to Lord Tottenham, the scene when at the battle of Walcourt the officers of the Prince of Waldeck's army, and the prince himself, were distracted with anticipation of disaster, and when Marlborough alone, preserving perfect confidence until the moment came to act, turned the enemy's flank, and wrested victory from defeat.

As Marlborough looked then, in the midst of the roar and confusion of battle, so he looked now with his back against the cellar wall.

In answer to Brownker's demand for surrender he courteously bowed, but made no movement of compliance.

"A pardon, sir ; my sword, though always at the service of the King, is not at yours. Pray your authority in writing."

"Here is the warrant, signed by the Privy Council and Secretaries of State."

Brownker spoke more respectfully, and handed the warrant to his prisoner, who, thrusting his sword carelessly into the scabbard, beckoned to one of the soldiers.

"That torch, my man—nearer—so."

He read the warrant with a look of contemptuous surprise.

"On what evidence do you base this astounding charge?"

"All will appear, my lord, in proper course. For the present be pleased to place yourself under guidance of the captain of the guard and deliver up your sword to me."

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"You!" Marlborough looked at him with supreme condescension. "Nay, my good friend, not you."

"I must then use force. That would be regrettable, my lord."

There was repressed irritation in Brownker's tone, at which Marlborough became more and more deliberate.

"Regrettable indeed, for you, sir." His tone was now one of the loftiest pity. "Unless, indeed, I have made some strange blunder and his Majesty has honoured his private agent with a commission in the guards."

A grin, quickly suppressed, but obvious enough, quivered a moment on the faces of the two soldiers, and was broadly visible upon the countenance of the captain of the guards himself, who had entered at that instant, and for whose benefit the words had been said. But Brownker made no outward sign of annoyance.

"Take your prisoner, captain," he said to the newcomer, "and remember that your life will answer for his safety."

The captain, an Englishman, glared at the speaker haughtily.

"Gad 'a' mercy, Master Agent, teach me not my business, pray. If, out of good nature, I let you play your game, and hold the warrant, it was not for this. Men, present arms to his lordship." Then, saluting Marlborough himself, he said very respectfully: "It is with sorrow, my lord, that I ask your sword. Lud grant it may not be long before I draw my own at your command."

Marlborough bowed gracefully in return and gave up the weapon.

"At least, captain, a sword was never given into



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better hands or to advance a better cause. God save the King."

He raised his hat.

"As for my friend, good Master Brownker here"—he smiled, and took a pinch of snuff—"he has fished in such troubled waters that, on my faith, I am afraid he will scarce get safe to land."

"The fish, I thank your lordship, has been landed."

"Say you so," Marlborough rejoined, raising his eyebrows and turning to Hugh with a bow. "Then that poor fish has my sincere commiseration."

The careless smile was still upon his lips, but Hugh saw in the eyes that rested on his a moment a look of deep significance and warning. Brownker saw this also, and laughed suddenly to draw attention to himself.

"But your lordship is mistaken. The fish I mean is in this lady's net." He made Marie a mocking salute. "She fished deep for you."

At this challenge Marie tried to smile as Marlborough had done, but her parted lips revealed teeth closely set.

"A poor jest, badly turned," she said.

Marlborough bowed slightly to Brownker.

"By my faith, sir, but I believe you. Yet against so fair an angler even the fish cannot cherish malice."

Marie drew in a sharp breath.

"You believe him! You believe I was privy to all this?"

Marlborough glanced slowly from her face to Brownker's and back again, with the air of one passing judgment. He was the master of the situation and he knew it.

"I not only believe, but I will prove it, madam." Nothing could exceed the coldness of his tone.—"Cap-

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tain," turning to the officer, "have you received orders to arrest this lady?"

The captain chuckled.

"In my instructions, my lord, there was no mention of a lady."

"Then she is free, I presume, to leave this place," Marlborough said very slowly, fixing his eyes meaningly on Marie's face, "while I must go to the Tower.—Indeed"—he turned again to Brownker, and now his face was full of honest indignation—"I have leaned upon a broken reed and have been shamefully deceived."

Marie raised her head and advanced a few steps.

"I may go?" she said to Brownker in a mechanical tone. "I may depart?"

Brownker gave a low, unpleasant laugh.

"After what his lordship says, I should, if I were you, depart at once."

Marie looked him in the face.

"I thank you," she said simply, "for this, for all.—Pat, the horses. We have far to ride to-night."

She did not appear to notice Marlborough until the soldiers stood aside from the door to let her pass. Then she made him a deep courtesy, and with a gracious inclination of the head to the captain of the guard, who was beginning to look hungrily at her beauty, she passed out, Patrick at her heels like a great watchdog.

The captain sighed, and muttered to himself, then turned to Marlborough.

"Your lordship ready?"

"One instant, friend."

He stepped suddenly forward and laid his hand upon Hugh's shoulder.

"I have to ask of you, Mr. Montgomery, for the

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sake of old comradeship, will you take the news of my arrest to my dear wife?"

He spoke frankly, cordially, yet with a subtle accent of reproach.

Hugh reddened furiously, but did not hesitate. "I will do it, my lord," he said.

Marlborough looked at him a moment, then held out his hand.

"My grateful thanks."

Hugh's heart beat heavily. A few moments ago no power on earth would have induced him to touch Marlborough's hand. Now, after one short breath of surprise, he seized and wrung it hard.

"I thank you again," Marlborough repeated. "You are a true friend. Captain, at your service."

A word of command, the tramp of heavy feet, and Brownker and Hugh were alone with the soldier holding the torch.

"You did well," Karl said quietly as they went up into the hall. "Much may be learned by seeing the countess when she first hears the news. She will be so beside herself with rage that like enough she will betray something of importance. We will start at once for Berkeley House."

They were in the hall by this time. Hugh turned about at these words, and faced Brownker with a strange expression in his eyes.

"You are under a mistake," he said. "I go alone."

## CHAPTER XXXI

HUGH rode fast, and reached the neighbourhood of Berkeley House in half an hour. As he drew near his destination, however, his pace slackened until he stopped altogether to consider. Finally, after a minute of deep thought, he turned back and trotted briskly up the drive of Tottenham Place.

The earl was at home, and Hugh found the place in a bustle. Before he could go upstairs the old house steward drew him timidly aside.

"Crave pardon, Mr. Hugh, but have ye heard the French have landed and the Earl of Marlborough has gone to command their army? We'll be murdered in our beds, belike, if that is true."

"It is a lie," Hugh said with decision. "There is not a Frenchman this side the Channel, nor will there be. The fleet will see to that."

"Thank God!" the man said fervently. "I had forgot the fleet."

"Pray heaven," muttered Hugh, "the French have done the same."

Lord Tottenham was sitting, booted and spurred, eating a hasty meal. He signed to Hugh to join him, and the servant opened another bottle of wine. Hugh tried to eat while the man was in the room, but from the moment they were alone he did not touch his plate again.

"The news, boy."

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"We took him, escaping by a secret way."

"My God! Alone?"

"My cousin and her servant were with him. They were dressed as for a long journey, and in the stable were horses ready saddled."

Lord Tottenham swore loud and deep.

"Stay, my lord!" Hugh cried sharply. "Do not judge too soon."

The earl nearly dropped his knife and fork.

"You say that?"

Hugh pushed his plate away and walked restlessly to the window and back again.

"I say it is the most accursed tangle and mystery in the world. But I will tell you all that happened."

Lord Tottenham listened to the story with bent brows and a face of unchanging sternness.

"The queerest twist in the whole skein," Hugh said in conclusion, "is that as he stood there, caught like any hare, self-condemned by the attempt at flight, and in company with her, I felt such pity, and such love for him that all the regard I had lost these many days came back. He was like a noble stag at bay before the dogs, appealing, questioning dumbly, proudly, Is this just? Is this fair play? My lord, I know not why or wherefore—there is no reason I can find for it—but on my life and soul I do believe now that Lord Marlborough is a true man, and that I have been, what you declared, the dupe and tool for some devilish design."

He sank into his chair, drank a glass of wine, and scanned Lord Tottenham's face. To his surprise a bitter, sarcastic smile curled about the lips of Lord Marlborough's oldest friend.

"Then he has netted ye, as he has done so many. Gadzooks, Hugh, you will have to find better proof



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than this before you convince me now that there is a tittle of innocency in him. His look, his manner? Pish! I have seen that look and manner. I know it well. It is only seen, my lad, in its full perfection, when he is in the worst of scrapes, and as guilty as the devil. I don't say," the earl snapped sharply, "that he is guilty now. All that I know of that affair I hear from you, and you blow hot and cold alternately. But I do say Jack has before now made those he has most injured think him white as snow, and that this air of his is a cloak that covers—Lord knows what!"

Hugh drummed his fingers on the table with an absent air.

"Maybe, my lord. But for what it's worth, my opinion is more proof is needed yet for any one to say that Lord Marlborough is a guilty man."

Lord Tottenham looked at Hugh attentively.

"You are a strange lad. By Gad, you are—and once I thought you simple. I cannot plumb you now. But what's to do?"

Hugh had risen and taken up his hat.

"I have to ride to Berkeley House to tell the Lady Sarah."

Lord Tottenham was pouring out some wine, but at these words he put the decanter hastily down.

"The countess!" he cried. "You had better far go hang yourself."

Hugh smiled faintly.

"Afterward, my lord, perhaps I may. But I have passed my word to do it, and called here upon my road to know if you would help me to break the news."

The earl sprang from his chair as if he had been stung.

"I—tell Sarah that her man is in the Tower, and—and the circumstances of it? Gadzooks, I would rather

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enter on a boxing match with a prize strong man, or buy a spavined horse, or fence Karl Brownker with a wooden spoon."

He sat down with a shiver and tossed off a glass of wine.

"Then I must bid you a good-night, my lord."

Lord Tottenham watched him a moment, sighed heavily, emptied his glass, and rose.

"You are going now?"

"They will soon be all abed else."

"Then, come. 'Oddsbum!" he said roughly, as Hugh would have protested. "You foolish boy, did you suppose I should let ye face the tigress alone. Let her tear me if she will; I am tough. Besides, if you went by yourself you would tell the naked truth, and rather than Jack's wife should think he'd been philandering I'd give my blood. Gad's life, if you knew that woman's jealousy!"

Hugh said no more. He had been sure, as a matter of fact, that Lord Tottenham would come, and was devoutly thankful. He had no relish for braving the terrors of a jealous wife alone.

The servant at Berkeley House, a footman of immense stature, promptly denied them admittance when Lord Tottenham inquired for the Countess Marlborough. She was playing hazard, he said, with the princess, and none might disturb her. He would, however, take a message.

"Take a devil!" cried Lord Tottenham, trying to push past. "Point me the way, sirrah. I'll announce myself. Is it the blue chamber?"

"Nay, my lord!" cried the man, blocking up the hall. "My orders is particular."

"Damn your orders, fool!" And seizing the astounded flunkey by the collar the excited nobleman

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shook him violently. The man, who could have taken up his lordship, burly as he was, in one hand, endured the assault with stolid patience. But when all was done he still blocked up the hall. Meantime Hugh had caught his eye, and abstracted a gold coin from his pocket.

"You have done your duty," he remarked, "and shall be held blameless, on my honour."

The man sighed and took the coin.

"As your lordship forced me from the doors with violence," he said meekly, "there is no help for it. —The fifth, sir, on the left."

He whispered the last words in Hugh's ear and stood aside.

Lord Tottenham mopped his forehead. "Gad, what a haystack!" he said, hurrying on. "Yet sharp, withal. He took my meaning perfectly."

Hugh thought that this was fortunate for his lordship's bones, but he did not say so.

They reached the door indicated, and Lord Tottenham knocked sharply. There was no response. They looked at each other for a moment. Then Lord Tottenham, who was several shades paler than usual, grimly set his teeth.

"We must see her with the princess, and at once."

And, opening the door, he led the way, and Hugh found himself in the presence of royalty for the second time.

The room was occupied by the princess and Lady Sarah, playing cards, and by Prince George snoring in an arm-chair. Neither of the ladies took any notice of the intruders, so intent were they upon their game. The princess lay on her couch, the countess sat on a low chair opposite, the card-table between them. Cards was the one taste they had in common. As to

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the winnings, the Lady Sarah often said that in all games of hazard she had wonderful good fortune, and this, in the games she played with Anne, was strictly true.

Lord Tottenham coughed vigorously.

"Your Highness," he said with a low bow, speaking hurriedly, "I make no apology for this graceless interruption. I know that with your Highness the welfare of your friends come before all etiquette. The Earl of Marlborough, madam, has this evening been seized and thrown into the Tower."

A flutter of cards, a jingle of coins, and a crash. Lady Sarah, springing to her feet, had upset the table, and sent everything upon it flying far and wide.

"Oh dear, my lord!" cried the princess helplessly. "Oh dear, dear. This is bitter news. May Heaven protect the poor man"—adding to herself—"and my hand the best this evening! Oh dear, oh dear!"

But she was sincerely grieved, and the tears coursed down her cheeks.

Lady Sarah stood upright and rigid, and between her parted lips Hugh could see the white strong teeth.

"My lord in the Tower?" she said slowly. "That must have been ordered by the Queen's Privy Council, of which my Lord Tottenham is a distinguished member."

"Had I been there," he answered shortly, "this would not have been done; your ladyship knows that."

"Then if it is not the Council——"

"It is at the instance of Karl Brownker, whom your ladyship has so often invited to your house."

He had been driven beyond prudence by her taunt, and lashed out regardlessly. But Lady Sarah scarcely noticed his retort.

"Brownker," she said. "Ay, the man whom this

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gentleman," turning suddenly on Hugh, "has lately called his friend."

This was a flank attack with a vengeance, but Lord Tottenham was equal to it.

"Mr. Montgomery, madam, has come here by my lord's particular desire to break this news to you. I have come with him to aid you to obtain an order from the Secretary of State for a permit to visit the Tower."

The countess stopped him with a quick imperious gesture.

"Indeed, I will ask no favour of my Lords of Nottingham or Sydney, who signed the warrant for my husband's apprehension—nor of any man who admits an intimacy with such villains."

"Then Gad's life, madam," thundered the earl, losing all patience, "what will you do? With your lord in prison, it is a strange time to cast insult in the face of his best friends."

"A true friend, my lord," rejoined the countess sharply, "would have been at work to release my husband, rather than wait upon his wife to offer what she can be a-doing for herself. Give me proof that you have ventured anything to save the earl from this, and I will kiss your hand. But you have done nothing—nothing. While this soldier here, who once professed so much regard for my lord, has been in close league with his bitterest enemy."

"Your ladyship wrongs him," cried Lord Tottenham. "I will not have it said——"

Lady Sarah stared at him haughtily.

"You will not what? My life! if I had time I would so deal with both of ye; but I want your news. Now, sir soldier, tell me quickly, and her Highness here, on what pretence was my Lord Marlborough arrested? Speak out, unless you be afraid of women."



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"My lord is accused of treason," Hugh said in a low voice. "A paper has been found with his name upon it, threatening the person of her Majesty the Queen."

"In which paper Master Hugh Montgomery believes as in the Gospel."

She hissed the words out between her teeth. Hugh realized now, with an internal shudder, the full significance of Lord Tottenham's warning.

"I believe nothing," he replied, "until it is well proved. I trust with all my soul to see this Association shown to be a forgery."

"But until we prove it so, my husband in your mind is convicted of the crime?"

Hugh's blood began to rise.

"I have not said that, madam, nor do I think it."

"Tell me what you think."

"I must be excused of that."

"But I will not excuse you. What!"—she stamped her foot again, and her face became convulsed with rage—"you, who have pretended the devotion to my husband men give only their dearest friends; who have made free with his house and all within his house, now dare to mouth before my face the foul and cursed lies invented by his enemies, and then, forsooth, beg to be excused! False-tongued, shallow-hearted, tool of villains cleverer than yourself. You are a very Judas, and if this house were mine I'd have you thrown into the street. Viperous cur! Out of my sight, or I do you mischief—out of my sight!"

Her voice rose to a shriek, her fingers twitched, her eyes were glaring, and her teeth bared. Lord Tottenham, who knew her well, thought Hugh in physical danger, and tried to step between them. But if the tiger was roused in Lady Sarah by the danger to her

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husband and her suspicions of every one connected with the King, the lion was roused in Hugh by her injustice. He faced her resolutely, and then bowed low to Anne.

"Your Highness, this is your house. Must I leave it without a word in my defence?"

"Begone!" screamed the countess before Anne could reply, "you have hunted my husband to his death; I'll swear it. Dog!"

"My dear—my dear!"

Anne's voice was mild as the cooing of a dove, but it seemed to rouse the countess to fresh passion.

"What! Your Highness takes his part, then?"

"I wish to say, my dear," the princess said, more mildly than before, "that the young man must not go until——"

"Then, madam, I will pack myself."

"I am sure, my dear," remonstrated Anne, "you misjudge this gentleman."

The countess now looked so dangerous that good Prince George, who never trusted her, opposed his great bulky person between the fury and his wife. But Anne, though a timid woman naturally, had been touched by Hugh's appeal. She had heard of him as a brave man and as an ardent lover of Isabel, a favourite of hers. Lastly, her obstinacy was now aroused.

"My dear," she said, with mild persistence, "the young man must not go until he has been heard in his own defence."

"He shall not speak in my presence. He shall never enter my house again," the countess cried. "By our friendship, madam, and my faithful service, and your love for me, send him a-packing now."

There was appeal in her voice at last. If it had been there earlier Hugh might have lost a powerful friend, but it was too late. Anne's mind was set.

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"I say he must be heard, my dear, in his own defence."

"Then you may listen to him, madam, alone," the countess cried, "while I endeavour what my lord's friends daren't attempt.—Lord Tottenham, lend me your chair and take me this instant to Lord Nottingham's."

Lord Tottenham bowed and offered his arm. Anne gave a little sigh of relief.

"God-speed to you, my dear, but be not too long away."

"Lord 'a' mercy, madam," cried her ladyship tartly. "I know not when I shall be back, but for sure you cannot miss me, when I leave behind so gallant and so personable a substitute. La! He'd be here long enough if the prince would let him."

And with a coarse laugh she laid her hand on Lord Tottenham's arm and hurried away.

"Quite a she-devil," observed Prince George. "Oh, a very devil."

The princess patted him on the arm in a motherly way.

"Quiet, George, quiet. Learn politer English before you try to speak it. It is but Sarah's way.—Now, sir," to Hugh, "you must go. Nay"—as Hugh would have spoken—"pray, not a word. I am convinced you are a true friend to my Lord Marlborough, whom God protect, the poor man! Stay, I would ask you something. Isabel Fretchville, my lord's lady steward, is a sweet witch of a maid. On your honour as a gentleman, do you still hanker after her for wife?"

This artless inquiry much astonished Hugh, but he had presence of mind enough not to shirk it.

"It is my dearest wish, your Highness, though, in-

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deed"—he sighed as he thought of Marlborough in the Tower and her ladyship estranged—"indeed, I have small chance now."

"Chut, sir," cried the princess, her face brightening in her interest and enjoyment of a sentimental situation. "If the maid is willing, your courage, an' you have it, should do all the rest."

Hugh kept a watchful eye upon the princess.

"Your Highness has not heard, perhaps, that I spoke once, and then she was not willing."

Anne smiled very knowingly, and beckoned with a fat forefinger.

"A word in your ear, young man. Speak to her again, or, if you do not speak, at least lose no time in seeing her and letting her see you, and that your mind has not changed. I may not tell you more, and my dear Mrs. Freeman would choke with rage that I have said this much. But I know what I know. No thanks. Be off, sir, and be a man."

She gave Hugh her hand to kiss, and then dismissed him.

When he had gone the princess leaned back on the couch wearily and took her husband's hand. He knelt by the couch and put his arm about her, and she rested her head upon his shoulder.

"That is a brave young man, George, and honest."

"I likes him."

"I have wished a many times," Anne went on, "that I might find a way of paying Isabel for her good care of baby. You mind when he was ill how devotedly she nursed him?"

"I minds well."

"My dear, I have paid her now."

George gave a doubtful grunt.

"But the countess will be very mad."

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"I shall have my way, George. I always have my way when I am sure. And now I am quite sure." Her eyes filled with tears, and, drawing his face down to hers, she kissed him. "My dear, your poor Anne has all the troubles in the world to bear, but she can bear them, for she is blessed with a husband she can trust. That is God's best gift to any woman. Sarah may rage her fill, but Isabel shall have the man she loves, for baby's sake."



## CHAPTER XXXII

HUGH left Berkeley House a new man. He had gone there weighed down in mind and body by the calamity of Marlborough's arrest, and the dark uncertainty beyond it. He went away to his own house at Westminster treading on air. He was beloved!

Hugh was not an imaginative person, and when his feelings were too many for him they found expression in hard physical exercise. Therefore he rode home at the fastest pace the darkness of the way allowed, and burst into his house with a rush. His mind was full of the inspiriting recollection that he had just added to his possessions one of the finest horses money could buy, and the calculation that if he started at dawn to St. Albans he could arrive at Hollywell House soon after breakfast. But a servant now intercepted him with some intelligence, and the world changed again—Karl Brownker was waiting for him upstairs. Hugh felt like some horse which, having been let loose upon turf, is suddenly checked by a jaw-breaking bit and thrown on its haunches. With difficulty he restrained an expression of something worse than annoyance. But he pulled himself together, and after a moment's thought ordered supper to be spread and two bottles of wine uncorked.

He met Brownker with as much cordiality as he could manufacture at such short notice, and entered into an account of his visit to the Lady Sarah. It was

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a true account, so far as it went, but then it did not go far. Lord Tottenham's presence was not mentioned, nor Lady Sarah's hurried departure to the Secretary of State, least of all the private words with the Princess Anne. This made the story very short, but Karl thanked Hugh cordially for his information, and neither by glance nor word betrayed the fact that having come from Berkeley House himself by a much shorter way than Hugh, after a conversation with a trusty servant there, he knew most of it before, including that which Hugh had left out.

Karl stayed to supper, and did fullest justice to it, and for some time studiously avoided the least mention of Marlborough. All this time Hugh's thoughts were very busy about his guest. What had he come about to-night? More, surely, than to hear news of Lady Marlborough. There was observable in his manner a frankness and cordiality which Hugh, whose suspicions had been seriously aroused lately as to the good faith of the King's Agent in any part of the transaction concerning Marlborough, viewed with extreme distrust. But, for once, Hugh did not express this feeling outwardly, at least at first. He had determined, as soon as he heard of Brownker's arrival, to adopt so far as in him lay the man's own weapons. Meanwhile, Mr. Brownker seemed to enjoy his fare and his company, and the second bottle of wine was half gone before, breaking a pause in a conversation about the threatened invasion from France, he suddenly leaned across the table with a curious smile, and raised his glass.

"A toast, Montgomery, in bumpers. Our friendship—may it last till death."

This move, as Brownker intended, broke down all Hugh's diplomatic reserve.

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"No," he said shortly. "I cannot; that would be drinking to a lie."

Brownker coolly held up his glass to the light.

"You think our friendship, then, a lie?"

"It is not worth the name now."

"There I differ with you," and bowing, he drained his glass. "Pray, more," holding it out. "I thank you. Your wine, like your honesty, friend, has not its fellow in the town."

Hugh filled up the glass in silence.

"Come, now," Brownker said cheerfully, his face all smiles and good-humour. "This will never do. Let me tell you your thoughts, man. 'This Brownker,' say you to yourself, 'is a most pestilent person, and I am weary of him. He has made use of me for his ends, while pretending the advancement of my own. He brought me to the King as if to give me opportunity, then found one for himself. Last of all—and worst—pretending zeal for justice, he has drawn Marlborough into a snare by a woman's wile, and will now undo him by fair means or foul.' Is that not a true interpretation of your thoughts?"

"You interpret very well," Hugh said grimly, "if I must speak the truth."

"You must," Brownker said with a laugh, "and so, for once, must I."

He became grave now, and had he been any other man Hugh would have said he was in earnest.

"I am what you suppose," he said, "in some respects. I have used you, and for a purpose, and I have come here to confess to it. But my purpose is not Marlborough's destruction and has never been." He paused to sip his wine and the earnestness in his face deepened. "My purpose, Montgomery, is to marry Isabel Fretchville myself."

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Hugh gave a start, but immediately recovered himself.

"Then what you said before we saw the King——"

"That was a lie deliberately told. This the truth deliberately told."

"But with the same purpose—to deceive me."

"I am, I say, telling the truth."

"You expect me to believe you?"

"Yes, because, if you think a little, you must see I could have no motive in inventing such a lie."

"I have yet to discover what your motive is."

"It is not far to seek, friend."

"Friend!" Hugh exclaimed between his teeth. "How you make a mock of truth at every turn!"

Brownker smiled an amused smile. "Recollect I said only till death."

Hugh's face became rigid and colourless.

"What!" he said slowly. "It is, then, to be the Hampstead fields again?"

"If it is your wish. It is not mine."

"You lie!" cried Hugh fiercely. "Why, it is the shortest way, the easiest, and the surest for your purpose."

Brownker stifled a yawn.

"My dear Montgomery, I prophesied once that with a little practice and instruction you could kill me. You have since practised, and you have been well taught. I should have no advantage now. For that reason, if you insist, I cannot refuse to meet you, but, as the choice of weapons would thus lie with me, I warn you I shall choose small swords blunted at the point."

He spoke as if the matter bored him exceedingly, but Hugh, whose faculties were keenly alert this even-

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ing, detected something beneath this indifference, something which gave him a curious shock.

"You mean, then," he said in a lower tone, "that you will not fight me to the death?"

Brownker shrugged his shoulders.

"I have a reputation to uphold for mendacity, it seems, so I leave you to decide."

The table creaked and shook, and the glasses on it trembled. Hugh had risen, and now stood close by his guest's chair.

"Brownker, I will have the truth of this, and your full meaning. You say you would marry Isabel?"

"If my wit can manage it."

"It has always been your purpose?"

Brownker paused a moment.

"It has been my purpose since I first knew you."

"You are a man who has fought a dozen duels for women, and have always killed your enemy."

"I have had that good fortune now and then."

"Then why, in God's name, did you not kill me when you had me in your power?"

There was a long silence before Brownker replied.

"It would not have been to my advantage then," he said at last very coldly. "Since"—he paused, meeting Hugh's eager eyes with a long, steady glance—"it happens that my mind is changed in certain ways. If to kill you meant even that I should wed her within four-and-twenty hours, it is no mock at truth to say I should decline the honour of her hand."

Another silence lasting half a minute and Hugh heaved a deep sigh.

"I have misjudged again," he said thickly. "'Fore God, Brownker, I have done you wrong."

He held out his hand, and the other gripped it.

"No man but you would say that," was the reply



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in a low tone. "Gad, Montgomery"—he dropped the hand and turned away with a queer, dry laugh—"why is it that, in spite of all our differences, though we have hated, fought, and lied against each other, and shall again, yet we clasp hands. I spoke the truth when I said that we were friends."

"You spoke the truth." But the words were spoken in a troubled tone.

Karl noticed it. "But you ask why? I will tell you, friend. This is the last time we shall meet in private until she takes one of us for better or for worse. To-morrow you go to Holland to convey despatches to the King, and plead for Marlborough's life."

He paused to smile as Hugh's face suddenly fell.

"I mean to-morrow night," he added. "Such a rider as yourself can do a journey to St. Albans and return within eight hours. Time enough for you to be betrothed, if she is willing, in between. Pish!" as Hugh uttered an exclamation of amazement. "Have I made intelligencing my especial business for so many years to be hoodwinked by you when more than my life depends on it? I know all that passed to-night, and all you intend doing to-morrow."

"Then you are the very devil, Karl." Hugh smiled as he called him by name, and they both laughed.

"You honour my poor wit too much, I fear. But that is to be seen. I cannot prevent your journey to St. Albans, nor the appeal to William. All I can do is to use them, if I may, to help myself, unless, indeed, you prefer that I should go to Holland in your place."

Hugh's face changed at once.

"God forbid!" he cried, then stopped. "Stay, I am sorry——"

Brownker took snuff.

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"My friend, we understand each other."

"I do not know that yet."

Brownker took up his hat and sword. "You will when you have thought it out, and I will go now to give you opportunity. We meet to-morrow night, then, at my house. The despatches for the King will be open for your reading, and you will have audience with him when and where you please. He is easier to see in Holland than in London, and he likes you—I will tell you that. Further, you are to see Isabel first, and if the words of the princess have any truth in them you should see her to some purpose. Is all this clear? Are the cards upon the table? Or have you still a question you would ask?"

"A dozen questions," Hugh said bluntly. "You have shown me cards, ay, but what others are there in your hand——"

"Hold, hold!" Brownker exclaimed. "That is enough. Why have I opened my mouth?" His manner changed. The smile left his face—left it cold and stern. "Because this struggle that is now to come between us shall be in the open, Hugh. The thought that I would tell you this came to me in the cellar yonder, when Marlborough cast his net about your shoulders and drew you from me. I have scorned you as a fool. I do not now. You are a man worth winning, friend. But our hearts' desire lies in this girl, so we must plan to trip each other up. Yet, for the sake of that friendship which will last through all I have spoken now, remember, I do not desire Marlborough's death, but Isabel to wife. Now I must go."

He took a quick step forward, and they gripped hands again.

"A good ride to you, my friend."

He spoke in the old tone, cynical and dry. "And a

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kind reception! But meet me at eight of the clock equipped for Holland."

He went out and closed the door carefully after himself. On the stair Hugh's servants watched him narrowly, and as the hall door closed they shook their heads and agreed when they compared notes that a face more sinister than this Agent's they had never seen.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

HUGH was tired out after the labour and excitement of the day, but instead of going to bed upon Brownker's departure, he paced his room until the candles grew low in their sockets, and it was past midnight.

The idea of going to The Hague with the news of Marlborough's arrest and personally pleading for Marlborough's life had not occurred to him until Brownker suggested it, but once in his mind the notion refused to go. In vain did he rack his brain to discover a reason why he should not leave England. There was none except the possibility that Karl would make use of his rival's absence to force his own suit upon Isabel. But this could be easily prevented by a word to Lord Tottenham. Besides which, Hugh did not believe in such a possibility. The air was clear now, the challenge thrown down. Poor Brownker! Hugh, flushed with the hope given him by Anne, could afford to pity his rival. Yet he was deadly, and was fighting for his life. Hugh's nerves were on edge with overfatigue, his brain throbbing. Grim forebodings began to chill him to the soul. He must go to William, then, but what plea was he to make for Marlborough? Lord Tottenham might swear that he had first heard news of the invasion from the earl, and that by this warning Marlborough had saved the country, but this would avail little against the Association with Marl-

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borough's name upon it, and the letter to him signed by James.

In fact, was not Marlborough really guilty, after all? And if so, what was to be said to Isabel, who would believe to her dying day that Marlborough was innocent? This problem depressed Hugh more than any other yet. But he must do his best, in any case. Plead for a full and open trial for Marlborough, beg for time to test every shred of evidence, and, if possible, persuade the King that it was a woman, not high treason, that was at the bottom of it all.

Having arrived at this conclusion, Hugh made up his mind to go to bed, and had stooped to extinguish the candles when he heard the violent ringing of a bell. Such a sound at the dead of night is always ominous. In Hugh's present condition of nerves it brought him to the door and out into the passage in a moment. There he heard his servant unbarring the hall door, and going downstairs, found him holding a candle, under the light of which was Marie's face, pale, eager, imperative.

"I will not be denied," she was saying. "I am Mr. Montgomery's cousin."

This statement was not at all convincing to Pim, the butler, an old soldier in Hugh's company, but hearing his master behind him he stood stiffly aside, upon which Marie swept in like a whirlwind.

"I have come on a matter, Hugh," she cried, "that admits of no delay. I am on my way to France."

Hugh bowed, without pretence of welcome.

"To-morrow morning——" he began.

"I shall be at Dover. You must take me in to-night, and give me food, and listen to me. Quick, tell your man. Ah, there is Patrick. Pat, close the door."

At her word the door was slammed with a mighty



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bang, and Patrick, looking truly enormous in a huge riding-coat with a heavy cape, placed his back against it with a nod which made Pim tingle all over. Hugh's face darkened, and with a smothered exclamation he was about to give Pim an order which would have had serious results when Marie laid both hands upon his arm.

"For Heaven's sake, help me, Hugh—for Isabel's sake, listen to what I have to say."

The name made him pause. Then he shook his head. "I will not listen here," he said. "I will not have you within my house five minutes. Go back to Chelsea, and at the earliest hour you please after daylight I am at your service."

Marie stamped her foot.

"You fool! What! you will ruin yourself and bring misery upon all you love for the sake of a punctilio, a prudish, craven fear of what the world may say—and you call yourself a man?"

There were now steps outside and the tramp of feet in the road. At this sound Marie shrank up to Hugh with terror in her eyes.

"I have been followed, pursued. Hugh, protect me—hide me away somewhere. You will not give me up."

A violent knocking at the door. Hugh pointed up the stairs.

"Go to the first landing. No one will follow." She obeyed swiftly. "You, sirrah," Hugh added to Pat, "follow your mistress." Then, as the man gave a longing glance at the door and clenched his fists, "Nay, friend, get you out of sight, for they will recognise you. Pim, open when I give word, but not before."

On the wall were hanging two heavy cavalry swords. These Hugh took down, giving one to his

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servant and feeling the edge of the other himself. Meanwhile the knocking continued without intermission, and brought all the servants from their beds. At sight of the swords the women screamed and ran away, while the men, scarcely less frightened, hung about the hall sheepishly in corners. Hugh made a sign to Pim, the door was opened wide, and in walked Lord Tottenham.

At sight of the bare steel and the grim faces his lordship stared in open-mouthed surprise. Then he burst out laughing.

"By Gad, do ye take me for the French?"

"Not quite, my lord," Hugh answered, joining in the laugh. "But I thought you were an enemy."

All was bustle now, and whispering and smothered laughter in the servants' quarter, for my lord had come in his chair with an escort. Hugh ordered suitable refreshment for the men and took the earl upstairs. Nevertheless Hugh was very much put out at this invasion.

"I have a visitor," he said abruptly, making no reply to a few words from my lord explaining his reason for making a call at such an hour. "My cousin."

He had no time to say more, for Marie herself appeared in the doorway. She had thrown off her cloak, hat, and gloves. Her hair was dishevelled with riding, her face flushed with excitement, in consequence of which she looked prettier than usual and particularly mischievous. Lord Tottenham at this vision in a bachelor's quarters bowed with a wicked smile.

"Gad's life, I could sink with confusion," he cried, "to intrude upon a friend at such a time. No wonder swords were out of sheath, and your face murderous, Hugh. 'Oddsbum, I will depart this instant—ho, ho, ho!"

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He had been laughing internally from the first glimpse of Marie's face, but had maintained a decent appearance of gravity while speaking; now he broke down and burst out into a long guffaw. Hugh was highly annoyed, for he foresaw an unending series of broad jests at his expense. Moreover, inevitably as the incident had come about, it was not very easy to explain; yet he could not help joining in the laugh against himself, while Marie, shooting coquettish glances at the earl, seemed the merriest of all. Yet she spoke first.

"This cousin of mine, my lord," she said, "is so brave that he risks not only life for my protection, but a most precious reputation."

She spoke bitterly, for with a true instinct she divined all that Hugh thought of her and hated him for it. The earl laughed again.

"Reputation! 'Pon my life, my fair mistress, he has none, not a shred. Gad, I can assure you there's not a man in town that is a greater prude. But your friendship—I beg pardon, cousinship, I think you called it—has broke the spell once and for all. Ha, ha, ha!"

At this speech Hugh's lips tightened. The matter had ceased to be a joke.

"I did not know, my lord, that you would need an introduction to this lady," he said stiffly. "Mistress Marie Montgomery is the only child of my father's brother—Sir Charles. I thought that you had met."

At Marie's name Lord Tottenham's manner underwent a remarkable change.

"Indeed, we have not met," he made a stiff, formal obeisance. "I am your servant, madam."

His eyes were cold now. He gave Marie a keen

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glance which she found it hard to meet. Her colour rose, and she turned haughtily to Hugh.

"His lordship has doubtless come to see you upon business. Perhaps he will allow me to do mine first, as I have to start within two hours for France."

Lord Tottenham bit his lip, and with another bow was about to leave the room, when he was arrested by Hugh's answer :

"If your business concerns the Earl of Marlborough, as I think it does, it must be done in my lord's presence."

Marie nervously twisted her fingers.

"I prefer—I insist, that we shall be alone."

"His lordship is the earl's nearest friend."

"Do not forget," Lord Tottenham said dryly, "I am his wife's as well."

Marie writhed under the glance he gave her, but she met it bravely.

"I have naught to say," she said defiantly, "think what you please, that could not be said before her ladyship herself."

"In that case, my dear madam," he rejoined in a gentler tone, "there is nothing you need fear. Come, come, you may trust me, on my honour."

He spoke in a kindly, reassuring tone.

"Take counsel with us both. The truth is I love Lord Marlborough, and I believed you had tempted him to treason. I may be unjust."

"You are bitterly, horribly unjust."

"Prove that, and help my boy here to save his life, and then ask what you will of Ned Tottenham. Gad's life, madam, if you have an ounce of regard for that poor friend of mine who once befriended you, you will not look askance at me."

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Her eyes became dim with tears. "I would give my life for his," she cried, "and my life's blood, drop by drop. This is the reason why I am here now."

The words came as if wrung out by a force she could not resist; then she broke down, buried her face in her hands, and sobbed aloud.

Lord Tottenham made a quick sign to Hugh to leave the room and pointed to the candles, the last of which was just burning itself out. When Hugh came back bringing fresh lights himself he found Marie fully recovered, and talking fast and eagerly. At Hugh's entrance Lord Tottenham interrupted her.

"That is what I want, just what I want," he said. "But it must be writ down and signed.—Hugh, fetch pen and paper. You must be my secretary now, and write this statement, which shall be laid before the House of Lords."

Marie began to look frightened.

"I dare not go before the House of Lords. I should surely die of fright."

Lord Tottenham did not appear to hear her. He was examining the point of the quill pen Hugh had laid on the table.

"The House of Lords," he repeated absently. "Ay, and at notice of your attendance there, dear madam, it will for sure be full to overflowing."

Marie raised her head, and instinctively smoothed back her hair.

"All to see and hear a poor girl speak against the Agent of the King. Surely not."

"A woman who is brave enough to face Karl Brownker," Lord Tottenham went on in the same absent tone, "will attract and win the hearts of every man at Westminster. But if you are afraid——"

Marie laughed and shook her head.



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"I am not the least afraid. I am ready to begin, my lord."

Hugh had collected writing materials, and seated himself obedient to the earl's instructions. But his face, Lord Tottenham perceived, expressed doubts and questions which should be set at rest.

"The fact is, Mr. Secretary," he said in a cheerful tone, "while you obtained your candles I obtained your fair cousin's confidence. You know that I have been certain from the first my Lord Marlborough was the victim of a plot. That plot our madam here will now unfold, and you must write it down. It is what the lawyers call a deposition, and as such will go before the House of Lords—ay, and the Queen herself. I am a justice of the peace, and can make the paper legal evidence; and our mistress being your cousin"—here Lord Tottenham's cheerfulness was such that he even paused to chuckle—"or at least so she leads us to believe, cannot but speak the truth, and further, she will take oath upon it all. Madam, we are ready. Pray begin."

## CHAPTER XXXIV

MARIE'S statement was delivered, signed, and sealed in two hours. All that pertained to the secret instructions of Karl Brownker, to the decoying of Marlborough to Chelsea, the production of the forged documents—the Association and the letter from James to Marlborough—was put down, and sworn to, together with a reasonably truthful account of Marlborough's last visit to herself and his rejection of the proposal to go to France.

It was a telling and circumstantial story, and Lord Tottenham, ever sanguine, was confident that with proper manipulation he could knock the bottom out of any evidence Brownker could produce.

The servants were then roused up, and Marie was sent home to Chelsea under a strong escort, with written orders from Lord Tottenham, in his capacity of a justice of the peace, to appear before the Secretary of State next day. This would prevent any danger of Brownker attempting by illegal method or intimidation to get possession of her person, and stifle her evidence.

"What I cannot understand," his lordship said, as he sat down with Hugh to eat the remains of the last night's supper, for sleep was out of the question, "is the motive of this accursed villain for hunting Marlborough into such a hole. It must be that William has such devilish spite against Jack that he will stick at

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nothing, and that Brownker is promised some particular bounty if he compasses the deed. Yet that is not like William, nor, to give him justice, your old enemy. No!" and the earl thumped the table, in his earnestness, until the glasses rang. "No, by Gad! There is something behind it all. We have not plumbed him yet."

Hugh said nothing. He knew the answer to the question, but felt it better not to give it—at least until he had seen Isabel, of whom his mind was full. After consideration, however, he told the earl of his proposed expedition to St. Albans. Lord Tottenham grumbled.

"Business should come first. If you delay your journey to William but one day," he said, "by Gad, you may find Brownker has struck first, and the King's mind closed against any argument or reason."

"But I am to convey a full report, which is open for my perusal, and to which I can make additions."

"Pish! How about the private report, which you will not peruse? It is my thought you should reach William before he can get that. But maybe 'tis all the same, and who can blame a man for going to his maid; not I, i' faith! What! your horse is ready now?"

They heard it on the pavement beneath the window, and Hugh rose, though his breakfast was not half eaten.

"I shall be back to-night," he said. "You will see Brownker, my lord, touching my cousin?"

Lord Tottenham laughed.

"Oh, ay. I will see him. But mark me, his nose will be on the scent, no matter what I say. You fear that?"

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"I fear nothing," Hugh said, wringing the earl's hand, "if what her Highness said proves true."

He swung off down the stairs, and was upon his horse almost before Lord Tottenham had time to draw up the window-blind. A wave of the hand, and with a mighty clatter of hoofs on the stones, Hugh's impatient horse swept round the corner, and Lord Tottenham, with a smile and a sigh, sat down again and finished his breakfast.

He had not told Hugh of his adventures last night. How he had found the Secretary of State obdurate to every plea to grant Lady Sarah permission to see her husband, which had sent that unfortunate lady back to Berkeley House frantic with rage and anxiety; how, after her departure, Lord Nottingham said that he had received the strictest orders from the Queen herself to admit no one to the Tower, and until this instruction was countermanded could issue no permit at all; how the whole country was in a panic over the invasion, and popular feeling ran so high that if Marlborough were tried immediately he would have a very slender chance of escaping with his life. All this Lord Tottenham had intended to tell Hugh when he invaded him so unexpectedly, but Marie's presence had turned his thoughts and ideas, and there had been hardly time since. While his lordship finished his breakfast, however, he ran over in his mind all his experiences—calculated the chances and weighed the pros and cons. As a result, when he went out he bent his steps, not to Brownker's house, nor to the Secretary's, but to St. James's Palace, and arriving there, sent an urgent appeal to be allowed a few minutes' private audience with her Majesty the Queen. This was granted, and when he made his bow in the royal closet he held Marie's statement open in his hand.



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Meanwhile Hugh pursued his way to St. Albans. He rode at such a pace that the country people thought the French had landed, and consternation spread far and wide. At Elstree, where he stopped for a few minutes to rest his horse and refresh himself, he was besieged by eager questions and the wildest statements. The fleet had been destroyed, James had arrived at Plymouth, Queen Mary was flying for her life, and last—and worst, to Hugh's ears—the people declared that Marlborough was at the bottom of it all. They knew, Hugh discovered, that he was now in the Tower, and though no one had the least evidence to produce in support of his opinion, the impression seemed to exist everywhere that he should be beheaded out of hand. Hugh lost patience at last, and so vigorously pooh-poohed the danger, and defended Marlborough's name, that the perplexed and frightened people began to suspect him of being a Jacobite himself. But no one actively interfered with his movements, and he was presently alone again on the St. Albans road. He rode faster now. What if these rumours had reached St. Albans, and Isabel, alone at Hollywell, believed them! The thought maddened Hugh. He drove in the spur and flew.

Hollywell House looked dull and deserted. It was noon, but no children were playing on the lawn or frolicking about the drive. A bright and beautiful May day, yet the windows were all closed, and over many the blinds were drawn. A new fear seized Hugh. The place had been deserted. He leaped from his sweating horse, and rang the great bell furiously. The summons was quickly answered, and the servant started with surprise at what he saw. Hugh was splashed with mud from head to foot, his face was haggard and wan.



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"Mistress Fretchville, John——" Then he paused, for the man laid a finger on his lips.

"Speak soft, sir, he is asleep!"

"Who? What do you mean?"

"Master Charley. You have heard?"

"Not a word."

"Why, he sickened with a fever, nigh a week ago, and they've give him up, all but the Mistress Isabel—she gives nothing up, God bless her. But he's a-dying sure."

Hugh was in the hall now, the door shut behind him. In five minutes he knew all that had happened. There had been sickness in the village—some obscure form of malignant fever—and just as Isabel had made arrangements to remove all the children Charley was stricken with it. The rest, with Madam Carrington and all the maids, were gone to Lord Godolphin's. Isabel herself, giving up all her work, had taken sole charge of the boy. No one had seen him but herself and the doctor, and this servant, John Biggs, an old retainer. He told Hugh that Isabel had scarcely tasted food, and not slept at all.

"The little one cries so," the old man said, tears trickling down his own cheeks. "Always a-cryin', and when the doctor's there he screams till I can hardly hold myself."

"Doctor Burtnup is the best," Hugh began, when he saw a curious expression on the butler's face.

"But it ain't Burtnup, sir, it's Sir John Horniman, the great physician, and—he—he's different. Mistress Isabel fair loathes him."

The mention of her name drew Hugh's thoughts into another channel.

"I must see her, Biggs. Tell her I am here."

The man shook his head. "She'll not come till

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after Sir John has called. The boy is crying now—listen!”

He pointed up the stairs, and Hugh heard a broken wail that cut him to the heart, but his purpose held.

“It will be but for a moment. Go to her, and say—ay, you must say it—the earl is in danger of his life.”

The butler started. “God ‘a’ mercy! What’s to do, sir?”

But Hugh, burning with impatience, and the irritation of being in a situation that crushed at a blow all his hopes and anticipations, could not endure further questions.

“Obey me, man, and go. I will see her, though I storm the sick-room.”

The man gave a deep sigh, and then trotted obediently away. He was bursting with curiosity, but there was something in Hugh’s face that would not be denied. Hugh paced the hall. In a few moments he heard a well-remembered step upon the stair. How pale she looked, and sorrowful, and yet more beautiful than he had ever seen her, for in her eyes, heavy and weary as they were, there was an eager longing. They clasped hands, and a deep sense of peace entered Hugh’s heart. In her distress and bitter sorrow she turned to him.

“You were good to come,” she said. “But how hard you have ridden! Biggs, bring wine and anything there is into the library at once. Come there, and tell me—tell me all.”

They went there, and though Hugh resigned her hand before the servant, no sooner were they alone than he claimed it again and held it fast between his own.

“He is in prison?” she said.

“For the time, but we shall presently deliver him.

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Be sure of that. I am going to Holland, to the King. Lord Tottenham will raise every interest here. Have no fears of the result." He believed this while he spoke.

She smiled—the first smile, if he had known it, that had been there for many weary weeks.

"I have no fears."

"But Charley, how is he?"

"So ill." The words came in a whisper, and her eyes filled with tears. "The doctor says that he must die."

"You believe this doctor?"

"He is a brute." She spoke with a slow emphasis that made Hugh start.

"Why do you have him?"

She gave a bitter sigh. "Because Charley is not my child, and Sir John Horniman is directly chosen by her ladyship, and my poor Burtnup forbid the house. Hugh, I could kill that man." She gritted her teeth. "I thought I should have done so the other day."

"Tell me all about it, Isabel."

He held her hand closely, and this brought them very near together. But it was Isabel's fault. Without thinking of it she had called him by his name; nor did she draw away from him now, as she ought to have done.

"He is careless, rude, cruel, heartless. He would make the boy swallow his medicines and be bled by threats and violence, and takes a pleasure in his cries."

"What! he bleeds so young a child!"

"Each day. You will not know the manikin, he is so thin and white. I protested, prayed, beseeched against such treatment, then at last threw the leeches

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out of window. He slunk away that day. Then sent express to town, and next morning—it was yesterday—came a letter from her ladyship which I dare not disobey. The man has not come, but he sent word he would be here this morning. Hark! There is his coach. Oh, if my lord were here! I sent privily to him, but what you say explains it all. He has heard nothing, and now he will hear nothing, except that his best-loved child is dead—is dead.”

She was sobbing now, the deep-drawn, heavy sobs of one overwrought and overdone with sleepless nights and hard work, and bitter anxiety borne all alone. Hugh's heart was nearly bursting, yet his face, as he stooped over her, and without word or question took her in his arms and kissed her, was white and rigid.

“Isabel! Will you trust me to stand in my lord's stead?”

She stopped crying, and raised her face wonderingly, doubtfully, and Hugh saw with a curious thrill that in the tense preoccupation of her thoughts she was apparently unconscious of all that he had done.

“What shall you do, then? What can you do?”

“All that needs doing. Take me to the manikin and see.”

She smiled, with the content of one who has suddenly found rest and strength, and as the crushing of the gravel outside announced the arrival of the doctor she led the way into the hall. Biggs was just about to undo the door.

“Hold, man,” Hugh said, and in his tone, though quiet enough, there was a ring that took away the worthy servant's breath. “Do not open. Send to the stable first. Bid two men saddle and with a spare horse ride top speed to Dr. Burtnup. If he is not there

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let them follow till they find him. If he comes within an hour they will earn five pounds apiece."

The old man gasped.

"But—but, my lady, sir, she said——"

Hugh stamped his foot.

"Obey, I tell you. And leave me to deal with her ladyship. Off—instantly!"

The old servant waited no longer, but vanished, chuckling to himself, while Hugh followed Isabel upstairs, and entered the sick-room. A tousled little head lay upon the pillow, and a wasted, frightened little face, which at sight of Hugh changed and brightened into a weak, trembling smile. Then a pair of tiny arms held out to him, and a faint voice crying:

"Hugh, Hugh; oh, my daddie-Hugh. Poor Manny is so sick, poor Manny very sick."

What happened for the next minute Hugh never told any one. He threw himself on his knees by the bed, drew the child's head on his shoulder, and kissed the white hot lips until Charley drew away with big astonished eyes.

"You cry too? Why, daddie-Hugh, has big ugly man hurted you?"

A heavy step now sounded outside the door, and Charley, with a cry of terror, clung desperately to Hugh.

"Send him away," he screamed. "Oh, don't let him touch Manny. Don't! don't!"

The door opened, and a stout, severely dressed gentleman, with a gold-headed cane, a coarse-grained face, and a luscious flavour about his person of strong liquors, stalked pompously in.

"How is this, madam?" he exclaimed in a hoarse, pursy tone. "Your servants need reminding of their duty; they kept me waiting two minutes at the door."

He puffed out his cheeks and paused for the ex-



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pected apology. But Isabel made no answer, and the doctor became aware that some one else was in the room.

Hugh rose to his full height and bowed. "Sir John Horniman?"

The doctor snorted.

"Who are you, sir?"

"A friend of the Earl of Marlborough. By your leave, a word with you in the hall." He passed the doctor and threw the door open to its fullest width. Sir John's red face became purple, and his eyes, which were small, ferrety, and sunken, gleamed spitefully.

"Presently, presently," he replied; "but you must wait, sir, until I have done my business here." And he turned to the bed. But Hugh, leaving the door open, quietly interposed himself between the doctor and his patient.

"Your business here has ended, Sir John. I speak in my Lord Marlborough's name. I will explain outside."

Hugh's voice was quite under control, but Isabel saw in his eyes the look she remembered long ago on a certain morning in the ten-acre field, and she held her breath. A feverish joy filled her heart, and her eyes sparkled. As for Dr. Horniman, he could hardly believe his ears. He, the leading doctor in Hertfordshire, to be bearded on his own ground, and summarily told to cease from his attendance upon a patient—especially a patient who, by judicious manipulation, would yield him a hundred pounds in fees, unless it died too soon, and of that the doctor was not much afraid—and by a youth! The act was monstrous—ridiculous.

"Zounds, young fellow," he snorted. "Your impudence passes belief. What! At your bidding I am

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to forsake this poor child lying at the point of death, and with my lady's gracious letter in my pocket. My lord himself should not dismiss me. Besides, this is a conspiracy; I see young madam smiling. 'Odds my life, you coxcomb, begone, or I shall do you a mischief. By Gad, I will kick you downstairs!"

His words came in explosive jerks, and, raising his cane, he shook it threateningly at Hugh. The next instant it was flying through the open door, and before its owner could gather breath for an oath, much less resist, he found himself seized firmly by collar and wristband, and with irresistible force expelled into the passage, and the door closed behind him. Hugh now released him and bowed with grim politeness.

"Your coach, Sir John," he said, "is waiting at the door."

"A plague on you, villain!" bawled the infuriated physician. "Your life shall answer for this outrage—your life!"

"It is at your service now." And Hugh laid his hand on his sword with a bland smile. Sir John Horniman fell back helplessly against the banisters.

"Murder!" he gasped. "Help!"

Hugh pointed to the door.

"Silence!" he thundered. "Down those stairs!" He advanced a step with raised hand as he spoke, but the doctor did not wait for him. With an agility admirable to behold in one so corpulent, he obeyed without a word, whipping down two stairs at a time, and, snatching his cane from Biggs, who handed it to him with a profound bow, he fled as fast as his feet would carry him to the coach. Once safely there he thrust his head out and showed his teeth.

"Your name, villain!" he bawled.

"Hugh Montgomery, late of his Majesty's Fusi-

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leers. My friend shall call at once. Let us say in two hours' time, as I leave for town to-night. Will you name the weapons now?"

Nothing could exceed the suavity of Hugh's manner. He had not been associated with Karl Brownker for nothing. The doctor paled to the lips.

"I will have the law, the protection of the law, against you; your fellow shall be locked up."

"Nay, then, take courage, doctor," Hugh replied, raising his voice so that every one of the crowd of grinning servants, now assembled round about, should hear him. "He shall not trouble you. But listen, please you, to this: If your patient dies—which God forbid—you shall be hanged for slow murder though it cost me fifty thousand pounds. And take notice that if you show your face within these gates again, the men have orders to loose all the dogs, and whip you into town. I am your servant, Sir John Horniman!"

He made a sign to the coachman, who, not at all liking the look of affairs, whipped up his horses without waiting for orders, and dashed down the drive amid a universal howl of derision from the delighted gardeners and grooms.

Hugh had a very short time to stay at Hollywell after the departure of Sir John Horniman, and no opportunity at all to say what he had intended to say when he left London. Scarcely had he returned to the sick-room and helped to quiet Charley, who was so much excited at the discomfiture of his enemy that he was in high fever, than Dr. Burtup was announced, and all was tension and anxiety. The little doctor's diagnosis was soon over. He pronounced Charley to be at the crisis of his malady, and though he thought little of the fever in itself, the lack of stamina induced by wrong treatment formed a serious danger, for the

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loss of blood had lowered the vitality almost to vanishing point. He gave his orders with his usual decision, orders Isabel had to carry out. When she had left the room, Burtup nodded at Hugh.

"If he lives you've saved him. That man would kill an ox."

"It will be the last patient he will ever kill," Hugh said between his teeth.

"Bah!" cried Burtup with a comical face. "You are inhuman. It is the way such men as Horniman exist—and a practitioner must live. But you have no professional instinct; you are a soldier and kill to order. Now be off with ye. Nay, you may rest content. I will save him if it is only to preserve Horniman—in pickle—as an ornament to my profession, on a shelf. Go, and don't come here again. This boy, if he is to live the night, must forget he ever saw you!"

Hugh obeyed and ordered his horse, then sent for Isabel with a curious sinking of the heart. When would they meet again, and what might happen in between? He had saved the son, they said, but if the father died?

Isabel came soon from the kitchen, her face extremely flushed. There was a change in her manner, too—a nervousness, a reserve, slight and indefinable, but felt at once by Hugh. In her hand was a letter.

"Pray give this, or have it conveyed to my lord," she said hurriedly. "He must have it. Else, if anything should happen, he would break his heart. Besides, whatever her ladyship may think and say, he, at least, shall know the truth."

Hugh took the letter, and then such a dryness came into his throat he could scarcely speak.

"Good-bye to you."



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He took her hand, and felt it tremble in his grasp, yet her face looked cold and white.

"I cannot tell you," she began, then paused. Her voice was unsteady too. "I can in no way thank you now for this."

A light broke on him, and he smiled. "Not now," he said softly. "No, but next time, Isabel—next time."

"Yes."

"God keep you, dear."

Her hand was still in his. He raised it to his lips.

"God keep you, Hugh." Her eyes had drooped, but when he let go her hand she looked up into his face.

"You will not be away too long?"

"I must see the King."

"Ah." He heard her sigh. "I forgot. You have to cross the sea. But it is to save his life."

"Please God I do it," Hugh muttered.

"You will," she said brightly, "or there is no one in the world who will."

And with these words echoing in his ears, he rode back to town.



## CHAPTER XXXV

IN a room with many corners, narrow windows, and scant furniture of the simplest kind, sat the Earl of Marlborough writing letters. He was sitting at a table, on which lay a little pile of sealed envelopes directed to ministers, noblemen, and members of the House of Commons—to every one, in fact, who might raise a hand to help him, or use influence on his behalf. He had written swiftly, easily, as a merchant writes letters of business or a modern editor his daily "leader." Composition of this kind, though he hated all writing, was little effort to Marlborough. Some men might have found it a difficult business to explain or excuse, much more to justify the circumstances of his capture and all that he knew could be brought against him.

But Marlborough knew his men. He was appealing to friends and enemies alike—he wrote to more than one enemy—to the motives which without exception ruled the statesmen of his time—self-interest, pride of place, greed, and most of all, fear. To the Queen alone did Marlborough trouble himself to give specific denial and explanations. The Queen and her husband were the only people whom he conceived would have a personal interest in his destruction. Her ministers—even those who hated him, such as Nottingham and Sydney—with James possibly on his way to England and William far away, must hesitate before

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proceeding to extremities, unless a popular tumult forced their hands; and even a popular tumult might be kept in check by men who felt that their own safety required it. So he wrote on calmly and confidently.

A time came, however, when his pen faltered—when he would write a word only to erase it—a sentence and destroy the sheet—when, in short, he was writing to his wife. This hesitation came from no guilty feeling touching his own conduct. His attentions to Marie Montgomery had been paid for a purpose that had no tinge of passion in it. He had used her as he would use a horse in battle. While she could help him on his way he treated her kindly, but when she failed he dropped the reins and went his way, and had forgot even her existence; but that he knew Sarah would not forget, and should evil tongues bear exaggerated accounts of what had really passed, would not forgive.

This fear troubled him more than all the rest—more than dread of what the King might know or what the Queen might do. Dearer than life itself was his wife's love and confidence, and no one knew better than himself how hard it had been to keep, nor, once stricken, how impossible it would be to bring it back to life again.

The creak and scrape of bolts and the opening of a heavy door. He was to have a visitor. At the sound Marlborough thrust the half-written letter away and rose, calm and self-controlled, to meet Karl Brownker.

A civil greeting passed between them. Karl's manner was deferential, Marlborough's the pink of courtesy.

"Nay, I thank you," Marlborough said in answer to an inquiry after his comfort. "I have wanted nothing but society, and now I have the best."

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He took out his snuff-box and politely offered it to Brownker, who, bowing, took a pinch. Then, as the jailer who had ushered him in departed, his manner changed.

"My lord," he said curtly, "we know each other."

"Indeed," Marlborough replied, taking snuff himself, and with smiling eyes noting that Brownker's hand was shaking, "we have been acquainted a long while, but you have some business"—and now his tone was as curt as his visitor's. "Let me hear it."

Brownker crossed the room and looked out of the window, went to the door as if to listen, and then, coming slowly back, leaned easily against the table. He was, in truth, very nervous. After this breathing space, however, his hand was steady, his voice clear and hard. By his eyes alone—bright, intense—could Marlborough tell that a matter was to be discussed as important to his visitor as to himself.

"My business, my lord," Karl said, "is a grateful one. I have come to see whether it is possible to clear your lordship's honour, and to save your life."

Marlborough closed his snuff-box with a snap, and dropped it into his pocket.

"My honour, sir, is in no danger, and my life is in God's hands."

"None the less, my lord, it is hanging by a hair."

"That I cannot tell."

"Your enemies are triumphant, your friends in despair."

"I have not seen my friends."

"A bad sign, for you have been here four-and-twenty hours, and my Lord of Tottenham is a friend of my Lords Nottingham and Sydney."

Marlborough shrugged his shoulders.

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"I have entire confidence in the Earl of Tottenham."

"A pardon, my lord," Brownker interposed, "but has the earl confidence in your lordship? I mean no insult."

Marlborough bowed indifferently. His face, which had hitherto worn an amused expression, now became cold and impassive, and the lips set into that immovable curve behind which might rage every passion known to man, but which would not betray one.

"You will be good enough, perhaps, to explain your meaning."

"In fewest words. I am on my way to see the Queen, my lord, and shall be closely questioned by the ladies of the court, one of whom is a friend of the Countess of Marlborough. She will repeat, with due embellishments—it is her nature—every word I choose to say. If I tell the truth, this will place your lordship's reputation in great peril. Then touching the other point—your life. The Association to destroy the Queen and signed by you is now in the hands of your bitterest enemies. If proven in any colourable way to be your work, attainder must follow. I trust I do not weary you."

He paused, waiting as a cat waits for a mouse to move under its paw. But the mouse made no movement.

"Nay," Marlborough said. "I have a liking for a tale when the story-teller has so much imagination. Pray proceed."

"Your lordship," Mr. Brownker continued, smiling, "well appreciates the position, I can see. It is an unhappy one, for Mistress Montgomery is notorious, and the noblemen and my lord the bishop whose names are attached with yours to this Association are all

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marked men. I fear, indeed, that your condition is almost past a remedy. If you think me wrong, correct me. I am here to tell the truth; I do not wish by a word to give you causeless pain."

His voice became low and gentle now, and he waited with an air of respectful sympathy for Marlborough's reply.

"Sir," the earl answered bitinglly, "though your mouth were stuffed with lies I could prove none any more than a man bound by the arms can return a fencer's thrust. To the purpose, please you, that lies behind this. Suppose all you have said is truth, what then? What though—on words wrung from a poor soul ruined long ago by you, and a forged letter written by another of your creatures—I am to be crushed—what then?"

"But this: I would ascertain if you are disposed to pay for honour, liberty, and life a ransom which will cost you nothing."

"Name the ransom, though I guess it."

"Such help and countenance, my lord, as will gain for me Isabel Fretchville in marriage." He spoke simply now, and with an earnestness of tone that arrested his listener's attention.

But Marlborough did not show it. He only leaned back in his chair with a sceptical smile.

"Marriage! It is marvellous that you should try so obvious a bite on me."

"If your lordship doubts my intentions——"

"A pardon. Mr. Karl Brownker's intentions towards those ladies whom he favours with his admiration are beyond all doubt."

Karl bowed gravely.

"A natural retort, my lord. But for once you are mistaken."



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The scepticism in Marlborough's face deepened, but his eyes became alert and watchful. He tapped his teeth with his snuff-box.

"Let us call it marriage then," he said lightly. "There are indeed times when that ceremony is a convenience."

Brownker bit his lip till the blood came. For the first time in his life he found himself losing his temper in a fencing match of words. For the first time his self-control, hitherto as invulnerable as Marlborough's, began to weaken. A dark flush now overspread his face, and though he held himself in with iron self-restraint, he showed Marlborough what was passing in his mind as clearly as if he had been Hugh himself.

"I do not look on marriage in this light, my lord," he said, "else I had been married when a younger man. You need not smile; I claim no virtue for it. My life has been without a scruple—not unlike your own, my lord, before the countess won you from yourself and made you what you are."

It was a chance thrust this—the inspiration of a desperate man. But no sooner had it passed Brownker's lips than he saw it had taken effect.

Marlborough's face was white as death, beads of perspiration stood upon his brow, and his voice became hoarse with passion.

"Have done," he panted; "you touch on dangerous ground."

"But ground common to us both," Brownker rejoined quickly. "I swear upon my honour that I have no more doubt of your fidelity to her ladyship than you need have in my loyalty to Isabel. And therein lies the point. Most people deny that marriage can reform. You have proved the contrary. I speak in all humility—but why should not I? As God

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is my witness, it is my determination that if Isabel becomes my wife I will never cast a glance again at any other woman."

Brownker was leaning forward and his hand trembled, but it was not through nervousness this time. Marlborough watched him fixedly. His face was calm again.

"You have not been to Hollywell of late," he said.

"It would be useless without your lordship's countenance."

"You know, then, that she has no tenderness for you?"

"A friendship——"

"Pish! She is in love—devotedly and deeply—with another man."

Brownker smiled as a man under torture smiles at his executioner.

"I knew that, my lord, two months ago."

"Two months?" said Marlborough reflectively.

"Two months ago you tried to persuade me to sail for France."

"Your lordship's memory is exact."

"And, since an 'Association' has been discovered by you with my signature, and I have been asked to go to France again."

"The interest of another person lay in that course."

"The hand behind was yours. And now you have me in the Tower."

"Only at your lordship's pleasure."

"Or your own—which?"

Brownker smiled. He was cool again, and therefore dangerous.

"I have been concerned to cause your lordship so much inconvenience," he said. "But no stake less heavy than your life will win me Isabel."

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“And if that fails to win her?”

“It is my risk, not your lordship's. Within two weeks, whether I marry her or no, if you will grant me the boon I seek, you shall leave this place without a stain upon your reputation. William shall be your friend, your family receive you back with open arms, and the country acclaim you as a man unjustly treated by some cowardly rival. My lord”—he was all animation now—“I go further. Should I succeed, there is no service you can ask that I would not render you. The King is pleased to give me his confidence. There is no reason why, with time, you should not soon return to favour. I have no love for Dutchmen, least of all Dutch soldiers. I would see you in your rightful place as commander-in-chief, when as husband of your ward I shall be your friend and servant for my life.”

He folded his arms tightly at the end and waited for Marlborough to speak.

With one elbow resting on the table and his chin upon his hand, his legs crossed easily, his eyes on the ground, Marlborough considered his reply. The contrast between the men was striking enough. Brownker, though perfectly still, was like a steel spring bent almost to breaking point; Marlborough, steel of a temper which seemed to feel no strain. At last, uncrossing his legs and leaning back in his chair, he said in the quietest of tones:

“This boon, now; describe it in particular terms.”

“A letter from your lordship to Isabel. You will tell her that your position is desperate; that you find I alone can extricate you. You will entreat her as she loves you, the countess, and your children, to use any influence she has with me, so that I may save your life and your family from utter ruin. That is all, my lord. Yet, stay; I had forgot.” He cleared

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his throat, paused, and then went on in a harder tone. "It will be necessary you should add that Hugh Montgomery has turned against you. You must mention the trap laid by him for your undoing: how that he knew of the plot against you, but gave no warning, and that because of this you forbid him ever to go into your house again."

Marlborough gave an exclamation of disgust.

"You would have me ruin the chances of an honest man by a pack of lies."

"These are no lies," Brownker answered calmly. "Recall the night before you were brought here, when you met him at Lord Tottenham's; did you not see that he had turned against you?"

He paused as if for reply, but Marlborough said nothing. "Further, you saw him, I think, at the Abbey House waiting for you and his fair cousin with his sword drawn."

He stopped again, but still Marlborough did not speak.

"Lastly, my lord, though indeed it is a pain to me to say it"—he cleared his throat a second time, and Marlborough, flashing a look at him, saw that his face was pale and his lips twitching strangely—"and last, I say, when after her ladyship had questioned him about you, she fell into such a passion that they feared for her reason. Since then she has been very sick."

He said these words very slowly, dropping them one by one, as a careful marksman drops his shot—to kill. Then he paused, and waited. He had done his worst. Suddenly he sprang forward. "My lord, you are ill."

The figure in the chair had swayed to one side and would have fallen if Brownker had not caught it in his arms.



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"A little water," was the faint answer. "I am subject to a giddiness at times from a fever I had once. I thank you."

There was water on the table and Brownker put it to Marlborough's lips, sprinkled some on his forehead, and loosened his cravat.

All was over in a moment, and in a minute or two Marlborough was courteously thanking his visitor, standing firmly on his feet, and refolding his neck-cloth.

"Now, sir," he said in a quiet, business-like tone, "to the matter in hand."

He sat down, took up a pen, and without hesitation began to write.

Brownker went to the window. A curious feeling of oppression had seized him also. The room seemed stifling. He longed to be outside. The window faced south-westward; below it ran the river, covered with busy life; beyond this the bank with wharves, and here and there scattered houses; near these were gardens and beyond green fields and the spire of a country church under the light of a sun drawing near its setting.

Brownker's face softened as he gazed, and the oppression passed away. If he succeeded, and of this he had small doubt now, there would be happiness and peace for him—a new life—and success for those she loved. Yet there was Hugh! A pang—a sharp, strong pain tugged at his heart. But, after all, Hugh was young and rich; he would soon forget. Pooh! did he not owe his very life to the strength of this love which only claimed its own?

The pen stopped scratching, and Brownker's thoughts flew back to the act of the moment.

"Read it," Marlborough said laconically.



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Brownker read, and his face brightened.

"I cannot be too grateful, my lord; you have only to give me your commands."

"You go at once to Hollywell?"

"When I have lodged a statement with Lord Sydney which will admit all your friends—and the first her ladyship."

A knock came at the door and the jailer thrust in his head and hand.

"A letter for my lord."

Brownker went quickly forward and took it from the man, closely studying the seal.

"From the Secretary—any answer wanted?"

"None, sir."

"Then retire. His lordship has the letter," and Brownker handed it to Marlborough.

"Your pardon, my lord," he said as the jailer disappeared, "but I have to keep up an appearance of suspicion."

He was about to take up the note to Isabel when Marlborough laid his hand on it.

"I have not signed it yet."

Brownker bit his lip.

"I am in some haste, my lord, therefore——"

But he saw Marlborough was not listening. He had torn open the cover of his letter with the Secretary's official seal upon it, and opened a letter inside, inclosed in an envelope which had not an official seal. Brownker had good eyes, and, approaching a little nearer, he recognised the handwriting to be Isabel's.

Marlborough read the letter swiftly, and Brownker, watching his eyes, saw the tears gather there.

"Bad news, my lord, from Hollywell?"

"My boy," Marlborough said tremulously, "the

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youngest, Charley. Sick—nigh to death, and a damned doctor. Thank God!"

He had forgotten his companion for the moment. His mind, his whole soul was far away at home. He saw the little wistful face, as Isabel described it; he heard the longing cry of "Daddie," which could never find response. Her account, short but pungent, of Sir John Horniman, made him, cool soldier though he was, gasp with blind rage. Then the story of Hugh's coming, told briefly too, but with all the eloquence and force a woman's pen could give—this almost unmanned him.

"Thank God!" he cried again. "And under him, Montgomery. He has saved the baby's life. God bless him!"

He paused, for his eyes rested upon Brownker's face, and noted that it grew pinched of a sudden, haggard, shrunken.

"This letter of mine," Marlborough said, all his old coolness returned to him, and not a trace of emotion visible now in face or manner, "which I have not signed, I will, with your permission, read again."

He read it very slowly, while the room was still, and outside the sun set in a bank of clouds and a darkening sky.

When Marlborough stopped reading and looked up Brownker leaned forward.

"Here is the pen, my lord."

They looked at one another, and Marlborough laid the pen on the table and smiled.

"I thank you, but, as it happens, circumstances have changed, and this letter is waste paper."

Still smiling he tore it in half, and then across again, and then screwing it into a ball, tossed it out of the window into the river below.

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All this time Brownker stood motionless, outwardly unmoved. When Marlborough returned from the window, he said in a cold, indifferent tone:

"These circumstances have changed your lordship's mind?"

"I know my mind, once and for all."

Brownker bowed, reached over the table, and pouring himself out a little water drank it slowly.

"I should like to say one word, my lord——"

Marlborough made a polite but emphatic gesture of dissent.

"No," he said quietly. "Do not so waste your time. I would part with you courteously if I may, but this Hugh Montgomery is my friend."

Brownker winced as if he had received a rapier-thrust beneath the heart, and without a word moved to the door, or rather stumbled thither. But when his hand was on the lock he seemed to recover himself.

"I wish your lordship well," he said in a low voice. "An order of admission shall presently be placed at the disposal of the countess, if she will use it. But I fear, I am very much inclined to think, that she will tear it up."

The door swung back and he went out. Marlborough was alone.

The sun had set, and the bank of clouds gathered ominously upon the horizon line, but the rest of the sky was clear, and there was a lurid afterglow above the clouds which penetrated the narrow window of the cell and shone upon the figure of a man kneeling in prayer, his face buried in his hands.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

AGAIN came the clatter of bolts and bars, but this time the door opened to admit the burly figure of Lord Tottenham. He caught Marlborough by both hands.

"Gad's life, Jack, I have had a chase after ye—first this Secretary, then that Secretary, then the Council, and at last the Queen. But from her, God bless her good kind heart, I got the permit that has brought me here. If you are glad to see me, man, lay it to the credit of the Queen."

"I am glad to see you, Ned."

"But—damme," Lord Tottenham cried, turning Marlborough to the light, "you are peaked, Jack. Why don't they bring a light? You are a ghost—faith! 'Oddzooks, man, we'll storm the Tower; we'll burn London. Gad! we'll get James over, if nothing less will do, before they shall crush you; and harkee! I have news."

He sat himself down in a chair, which mournfully creaked under the weight of him. "A deposition, signed and sworn to—to which a dozen witnesses can testify—has been made to me, which will prove that black devil Brownker to be the engineer of the whole business, for some purpose of his own. What think you of that, my lord?"

Marlborough smiled wanly. It was as well that the light was dim, else Lord Tottenham would have

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been shocked at the ghastly pallor of his old friend's face.

"Good, Ned. But who is mad enough to cross swords with the King's Agent for me?"

Lord Tottenham chuckled again. He could not help it for the life of him, though at heart he was sad enough.

"Why, 't is a woman, Jack; who but a woman? Need I say more?"

There was a short silence. Marlborough had made no answer, but sat still, his back to the window, his face invisible. Lord Tottenham soon found this too much for his nerves, and burst into a laugh.

"Gad's my life, Jack, but you should have seen my boy's face when he met me in the hall, with the pretty baggage there in his rooms, alone. I could write a play on it—The Puritan Discovered, or some such thing. She had just run in, pretending she was chased, and I, all unknowing, knocked briskly at the door. On which Hugh, ablaze with chivalry, receives me at the point of sword. Then, when I go in, tells me that his cousin is a-visiting. Lord, I thought I should have killed myself with laughing. Truth, we all laughed, even the Puritan himself at last. But, seriously, it was a most fortunate circumstance for you."

"These cousins," Marlborough said in a curt tone, "bear much affection for each other?"

"None," Lord Tottenham replied shortly; "none at all. She came to him perforce. She consented to come forward as a witness at my solicitation, much against her will, while he, but for my coming, would have turned her from his door."

"Then why came she?"



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Marlborough spoke in a tone of wondering indifference. Lord Tottenham flushed.

"Why? To save your life. There's no mincing matters here. She loves you, Jack, as only women love—some men. Brownker has great power with her. He knows her whole history—a pest on him!—he's had a share in it. He has terrified her, crushed her, held her in a vice; ay, and she fears him still, yet will she stand in public, give him the lie before the Lords; and have her reputation torn to shreds, to save your life. Gad! I told her you should know it all, and now you do. Under God's providence, your gratitude, if you escape from this, as please the Lord you will, is due to Marie Montgomery the Jacobite, and after that to my lad Hugh."

"Tell me what he has done."

"'Slife, what has he not? He has put power in my hands to spend money, his own money, up to twenty thousand pounds. He has gone to Holland to beard William in his den; and last—but not the least—he dared to face your wife, and in the presence of the Princess Anne, to tell her the news of your arrest."

A cold sweat broke over Marlborough. He tried to speak, but his tongue was tied. He could not ask the question that was on his lips. Lord Tottenham, whose thoughts ran in quite a different channel, lost all patience with him.

"Well, then, Jack? Well? Curse it all, can you not find a word for this? Is it so common, such service as he gives?"

"I have paid him for it with my best."

Lord Tottenham started and peered into the dusk of the prison cell to make out his friend's face. For the words came hoarsely, and were so utterly unlike anything he had ever heard Marlborough say in all the

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years he had known him. But the kindly gloom hid the prisoner completely. Marlborough rose and took his friend's hand.

"You must leave me, Ned. I am a-weary and my brain is sick with the shock of all this trouble. Come to-morrow and we will lay our plans. Forgive me if I seem ungrateful; it is not so. But I am tired—tired out. Farewell, old friend."

He had led Lord Tottenham to the door.

"You are ill, Jack. I hardly like to leave ye."

"I need sleep; no more. To-morrow, Ned, as early as they will let you in."

So he dismissed his friend and was alone—alone in the gathering darkness with the ghastly dread which now stared him in the face as certainty—the conviction that his wife would never take his hand again.

He sat down heavily and rested his arms on the table, his head upon his hands. The risk to life, the political extinction, the personal disgrace, all the misfortunes which he would endure as a public man, were nothing to Marlborough now. They were blotted out from his horizon by the agonizing thought of the bitter parting from his wife. They had been so happy, the trust between them perfect always. Until this moment he had not fully realized what it would be like to be treated as a stranger by her—nay, as an enemy, for Sarah must either love or hate. But he realized it now, and drank his cup to the dregs. If Lord Tottenham, stanch Ned Tottenham, could say as much of Marie, what would the world say, and Sarah, always sensitive, why, she would be goaded into madness.

Lower and lower drooped his head upon the table which presently began to shake from his deep sobs.

A little later he grew calm and began to pray again. It was a grim prayer this time, beseeching God out of

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his great mercy so to aid the enemy that they might bring him to an execution.

Death, and that as soon as might be, was all he longed for now.

The room grew darker, and still Marlborough sat, his head buried in his hands. The door opened, but he did not hear it. Utterly exhausted, he had fallen fast asleep. A jailer came in, placed a candle on the table, and stood aside from the door to let some one enter, then went out hastily, closed and bolted it. The person who had entered stood still until the bolts were drawn, then went quietly to the table, and grasped the prisoner's arm. He woke, blinked in the light, and then sat speechless. Close to him was the face that but this moment haunted his dreams. Not as he had seen it there—stern, cold, forbidding—but shining with tenderness and love. For another instant he feared it was still a dream, but now warm arms stole about his neck and held him in a close embrace.

"John, dearest," whispered a voice. "Look up; we are together now. All will be well—must be well. They will not—they shall not—dare to touch my husband."

## CHAPTER XXXVII

A HOT, dry morning in June, six weeks after Marlborough had been thrown into the Tower.

At Karl Brownker's house in St. James's the servants moved slowly and wearily about their work. Every face was tired and discontented, bearing witness to some prolonged strain of labour and anxiety. They had been worked nearly to death.

Karl, as town men often did in those days, was breakfasting in bed, and his face, though keener and more alive than usual as he ran through a mountainous pile of correspondence with his secretary, bore deeper traces of fatigue than any of his household. It had grown thin, hollow, and yellow as parchment, with a curious transparency seen usually after a long illness. Yet he was not ill physically. His appetite was good, his sleep at night—such sleep as he had time for—sound and dreamless.

"Now leave me, Porter," he said, settling himself easily back on to his pillows. "Tell Chinnic the horse must be here in half an hour. Send Young in, and so a farewell to you."

The secretary rose and bowed, collected his papers, and was going out when Brownker called him back.

"You have something, I see, to ask me," he said. "Ask it."

The man coughed nervously. He was a white-faced, undersized creature, with a fine forehead and a



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receding chin, a face bearing in every line of it the weakness of the drudge toiling at a pittance for another stronger than himself—faithful as a dog and receiving little more reward than one.

“Why, indeed, sir—I had a word—but, truly, I am not bold enough—I could not trouble you.”

“And why not, if I ask you?”

“Because, indeed—” the man caught his breath. “Why, because it is a favour, sir.” He said the last word in a frightened whisper.

Brownker smiled cynically.

“Favours asked by servants do annoy me, as a rule,” he said. “But on this day, as it happens, not. You are in trouble at home?”

The man gasped.

“You knew, sir?”

Brownker frowned. “Your wife is sick for want of food, your children badly clad, and your rent behind, because the tenants in your house were Jacobites and left you without payment.”

“Lord have mercy!” the poor wretch cried, clasping his hands. “And I thought it was all secret. I am ruined, sure.” His hands dropped to his sides and his face became callous in its hopelessness.

“It is all true,” Brownker said dryly.

“I deny naught,” was the answer. “Yet I am no traitor.”

“You are a fool, a graceless fool,” said his master impatiently. “And you leave my service this day.”

The man shivered and shuffled away miserably to the door. Brownker looked at him a moment, as if enjoying his pain, and then, thrusting his hand beneath his pillow, took from it a bag of money and a letter. “So great a fool,” he repeated, “that though you have



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worked for me by night and day for a pittance of fifty pound a year, yet you dare not ask a favour at the end. Take this, and this. Read the note before you go."

The man obeyed mechanically. It was a letter to the Secretary of State requesting him to give the bearer a post then vacant in his office worth two hundred pounds a year.

In the bag was a hundred guineas.

At this gift from one who had never been known to do a generous act the poor creature's lips quivered; he reeled against the table, and dropped the bag upon the floor.

"For me? All this—from you! But no, no, it is some mockery—I beg your honour's pardon—some small jest."

But Brownker, who was looking over another paper, with names and figures in it, did not appear to hear the words.

"Take this with you also," he said, "and pay all the men and women in the house as here directed double wages. You will find the money in the usual place. Take a receipt from each. And now, be off, and send me Robert Young."

He leaned back wearily and closed his eyes, but opened them when he found the secretary on his knees at the bed kissing his hand.

"May the Lord bless you, sir!" he cried brokenly. "You have saved my life, and the wife's and all. The Lord bless you for your goodness!"

Brownker started and then pushed him away, though gently.

"Pish—pish! Go, will you, and follow my directions. Go."

The man obeyed slowly, but his eyes streamed with

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tears and his lips muttered words of thankfulness as he made his bow at the door.

When alone, Karl took up a hand mirror and looked at his face in it with a curious smile.

"So the Ethiopian has changed his skin, the leopard his spots—all for a dozen words in a woman's hand." He sighed and took a letter up and read it for the twelfth time. The smile died away and left the face white and worn. "God knows," he added softly. "But I shall know to-day."

There was a light step at the door and a knock, and a man entered, bowed respectfully, and stood as if waiting for instructions.

It was Robert Young.

There was a marked difference in the appearance of "the Parson" from the time he had entered this chamber to encounter Brownker's rapier—the difference to be seen in a wild beast that has become sleek and well-fed in captivity. But he was a wild beast still. Above the cheeks, now round and pink with good living, above the fat, double chin, were the same vulture-like eyes, and cruel, sensual lips, the same cunning and wickedness, the same self-confidence, though controlled and carefully kept within bounds. He wore the air, indeed, of a confidential man before a master whom he held in awe, but of whose favour he was well assured.

"The news, man," Karl said. He was himself again now—alert, erect, keen as a rapier-point.

"The worst, your honour."

"Ah!" Brownker said coolly, for Young had paused.

"Master Montgomery," the man went on, "is back in England. He landed at dawn and will compass the Earl of Marlborough's release by noon."

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Brownker yawned lazily.

"Noon? By noon I shall be at St. Albans. Your last letter has been writ."

Young, who held a paper in his hand, bowed and presented it. Karl read it carefully.

"Fair—fair, but his Majesty is not so careful in his lettering as this. The W of William is too finely shaped. There should be some smears and dirty finger marks. But it will pass. More news?"

"Ay," Young said gruffly, obviously offended at the criticism on his skill. "The messenger from Marlborough has tricked us, after all, and returned to London. He reached the Tower last night, and now my lord *knows your play*."

Brownker's lips tightened, and Young, with a malicious smile, saw his face pale. But there was no change in his manner.

"Go your ways, then. Porter will pay you. Send me Chinnic on your way downstairs."

"There are no further letters?"

"None," and Brownker stretched himself. "The time has passed for letters."

The man lingered, twisting his hands with a leer in his eyes.

"A few urgent lines to my lord even now in her ladyship's hand would cause delay."

Brownker's lip curled. "If Marlborough knows, there will be no delay. Begone, will you!" He leaped out of bed and Young retreated expeditiously.

In ten minutes Karl was dressed for a journey; in two more he had mounted his horse and was leisurely passing through St. James's. In half an hour he was at full gallop away on the St. Albans road.

During the six weeks after Marlborough had been thrown into the Tower, Brownker had worked as he

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had never worked before in a life that had known but little play.

Truly, indeed, had the Lady Sarah gauged the man when she told her husband once that he was one who would pursue a quest with greater obstinacy the harder and more difficult it became.

Six weeks, in which Hugh strove in Holland for Marlborough's life with the King, and Lord Tottenham and the Lady Sarah in London strained every nerve with the House of Lords; while at Hollywell Isabel worked and brooded alone. Hugh had given Lord Tottenham no warning about Brownker. After his visit to Hollywell he feared nothing.

So the course had been clear for Karl and Robert Young. The postmistress of St. Albans was a friend of Young's, and from the day Marlborough went to the Tower every mail passed through Young's hands. Correspondence between the Marlboroughs and Isabel therefore flourished, but it was controlled by another hand. Robert Young's heart was in his work—for it was to ruin Hugh. He had never forged so well. In a week Karl was at Hollywell House.

He became Isabel's adviser now, and saw her nearly every day. She consulted him on everything, leaned upon his keen wits and quiet strength. He learned to know her mind and thoughts, and interpreted them skilfully on paper. In every letter from town his name was mentioned—Hugh's never, except in such a way as to give her vague pain and surprise. It was Brownker, Marlborough wrote, who was his only friend. Brownker, declared her ladyship, was now, she found, an honest man, the man beyond all others who could save the earl's life if it could be saved.

Mr. Robert Young was kept very busy writing in those days.

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Yet Karl, though he won from Isabel gradually such favour as he had never won before, though he had discovered early in the day that she was not betrothed to Hugh, soon found that there was no way of casting out his rival by fair means, for Isabel, it was plain, loved Hugh with her whole heart. For a time he tried to disguise this from himself, and to leave Hugh on one side. But gradually, as this became impossible, his scruples died away, and after one fierce struggle with himself he stopped at nothing. Post by post in the letters from London now came insinuations and innuendoes against Hugh. At first these made Isabel very indignant, at which Karl never failed to sympathize with her and praise his rival. But as time went on he became colder in his praise, and at last the day came when he abruptly refused to mention Hugh's name. He took this stand five weeks after Hugh's departure to Holland. Isabel was much hurt and offended, yet he could see she was perplexed. He then left her, and promised to investigate the matter and come once again. Then, playing a last card, he said that Marlborough's life was in the King's hands, and that in a few days it would be proved beyond all doubt whether Hugh was really trying to save Marlborough or whether, as had been hinted, he was in secret league against him. The cause for Hugh's treachery Brownker refused to betray, at which Isabel had laughed scornfully. Yet she saw by Karl's face that he knew of some cause, and his reticence, as he had calculated, tortured her more than any accusation.

He arrived at Hollywell this day—a week afterward—before noon, and after slight refreshment drew her away to the Nun's Walk. He made no pretence of coolness now. Weary with his ride, his voice was hoarse and agitated, his eyes, more cavernous than



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ever, glowed with a curious excitement that frightened Isabel.

"You have ridden madly, Karl."

He laughed mirthlessly.

"I have killed one horse and lamed a second. But I had cause."

He watched her with suspicious keenness, wondering whether any rumours, in spite of all his care—though every letter had been abstracted and every road was watched—had reached her that Marlborough was to be released to-day. A glance at her face satisfied him. It was very pale, and so sad that had he been less in stress his very love would have made him pity her. As it was it only set his mind at ease. He saw she was in fear, not hope.

"Tell me the cause."

He dropped his eyes suddenly as if abashed, and turned away.

"I have come to do that," he said bluntly, almost roughly. "But I can hardly shape the words."

"Marlborough is dead?"

"Not yet."

"Condemned?"

"Condemned."

He turned and looked at her, and his heart smote him all at once.

"Bear up, dear," he said tenderly; "there is hope yet."

Her face was ghastly, and her breath came in deep sobs.

"What hope?" she whispered.

"The King has sent me a private word. I had meant to say that first."

"And he tells you——"

Karl slowly drew out the note which Young had

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written, unfolded it, and read aloud, "'Montgomery has played—'" Then he pulled himself up. "Pish! that is not it. Here is what I meant: 'You must come at once. The execution cannot be delayed longer than a week. William R.'"

"You are going?"

"This afternoon."

Her lips were dry and parched in her suspense. A terrible nameless dread had come upon her. Brownker's trap had been well laid. She held out her hand for the letter.

"Let me read it all."

He shrank back. "My God, no! not for Marlborough's life!"

Her eyes blazed. "You are keeping something from me. The letter, I say."

He gnawed his lips, as if in bitter indecision. Then, turning away, he made a movement towards the house.

"I will go and do my best—alone."

All at once he turned back and faced her.

"Isabel, love you Marlborough's life and honour more than all else? Be careful what you answer."

"I must see that letter first."

He sighed, and slowly placed it in her hands.

"You must know some time. Why not now?"

The note was written in French, and Isabel had some difficulty in reading it; but she had taught herself enough since she had been with the Marlboroughs to gather the meaning of the words. When she had spelt it through twice she looked up and gave it back.

"Then I was wrong," she said simply. "He has played us false."

She spoke so quietly that, for a moment, Karl's heart gave a leap. Had her love for Hugh died? Then it sank again, as he detected behind her calmness an

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agony so intense that he made a quick movement towards her, thinking she was going to swoon. She waved him aside.

"I am quite well. Do not touch me."

"You should not have known."

"Read it aloud to me in English. I wish to be quite sure. Read."

Her voice was still without a tremor, but it was low and strained.

He took the letter in silence and obeyed, awed by a woman for the first time in all his life.

"'Montgomery has played his trump card,' " he read, "'and presented a petition from the Lords praying for Marlborough's death. You must come at once. The execution cannot be delayed longer than a week.

"'William R.' "

"Tell me the cause for his treachery."

Brownker's teeth shut like a trap. After all, she thought more of Hugh than of Marlborough.

"I will not tell you."

"You must."

They looked at each other and his eyes fell before hers.

"It is jealousy."

"Jealousy of my lord?"

Brownker coughed and his face hardened into stone. He knew that he was fighting for his life.

"My lord was arrested in the house of Lady Susan Montgomery."

"I know that."

"He was found in company with her ladyship's daughter Marie."

"Hugh's cousin?"

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"And an agent of King James."

"I do not see——"

"This lady is the cause of all the trouble. She decoyed Marlborough to London." Isabel gave a sudden start. "She won Hugh over. She deceived even me awhile. But I discovered her, for I cared not for her charms." He said the words with a supreme contempt.

"I have heard," Isabel said slowly, "that she is very beautiful."

"I know but one more beautiful. We must not blame Hugh overmuch."

"You said both were entrapped," she said quickly.

"My lord's interest was political. Her mouth was stuffed with specious promises from James."

"What! My lord has been treasonable then."

"Nay, only indiscreet. But the girl was infatuated with him. When she found that he was injured she cast away all thought of Hugh. Hence this madness of his, and pretended mission to the King and William's letter. Now you will understand."

He had struck the blow and driven the nail to the head. But he was hardened now, and careless how he wounded her. The very quietness of her manner irritated him. Isabel did not answer, did not move, but stood before him like a piece of marble. At last, with a quick impatient sigh, she roused herself.

"My lord must not die," she said slowly. "What is your plan?"

He was taken aback for a moment. It was as if she read his thoughts. Then he smiled at the notion, for she was not even looking at him.

"There is one way to save him, but that almost impossible."



## The King's Agent

She turned her face slightly and looked him in the eyes.

"Tell me."

"I must know first what you think of me."

His voice was full of feeling now, tremulous, passionate. A puzzled look came into her face.

"What I think! I? What have I to do with it?"

"His life rests in your hands."

She looked more perplexed than ever.

"I do not understand the least."

"William delays the execution until he sees me. This means that though the Lords clamour for my lord's death, William would save him if he could. He has a tender heart, though few know it. If a woman, with claim to his regard, pleaded for Marlborough's life, he would be as wax in her hands."

"You would have me plead?"

"It is the only way."

"But his Majesty does not know me."

"He might, if you willed it so."

She looked at him blankly. He had stepped forward and taken both her hands with feverish fingers. A light began to dawn at last upon her mind.

"You would have me go with you?"

"The King," Brownker said thickly, "would spare Marlborough's life, and more, if he were entreated by my wife."

She drew her hands away with a shudder.

"That is your plan?"

"You forced me to disclose it."

"It is impossible."

"My own word."

He did not move or try to claim her now. Yet he did not retreat. Instinctively he felt that he must wait.



## The King's Agent

"This, then, was the meaning of those later letters of my lord's."

"He has given his full countenance, her ladyship even more."

"You never told me so."

"I did not dare—nay, nor wish. I would marry no woman by another's word. By your own will you take me, Isabel, by your own free will, or I go away."

"My will," she murmured. "My own will. Why, I do not love you; I have never loved you."

"That may come."

"I have loved some one else."

"That was why I spared his life in the Hampstead fields."

She started. "You knew even then?"

"I have always known. And if he stands first——"

She held up her hand. "He is a traitor now." She said the words between her teeth. "He has betrayed my lord."

"He was sorely tempted," was the cool rejoinder.

"I pray you mention not his name again."

Brownker looked at the sky.

"In two hours," he began, then paused, and gave a short, sharp sigh. "I must go now. Farewell."

"You go to Holland?"

"To London, to tell all Marlborough's friends and Marlborough himself that it is hopeless. They will be surprised. But I am not surprised."

She made no reply. He lifted his hat and turned slowly on his heel.

"Stay!"

He stood still, waiting.

"Give me time to think."

He bored a hole in the ground with his rapier-sheath.

## The King's Agent

"There are but two hours for everything. I can give you only one."

"One hour, then."

"Even at this I must make arrangements."

"Do what you will, but let me think alone."

Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper now. Karl's heart swelled within him. Hope shining there had softened it. How he longed to take her in his arms and comfort her; and yet he did not even dare to touch her hands.

"You shall have all the time that I can spare," he said, "but it cannot be longer than an hour." And then with averted face and drooping head he went hurriedly away.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE rooks cawed sleepily among the elms at Hollywell; the insects buzzed busily in the hot, still air. The cattle dozed in the fields, or stood knee-deep in cool waters. All nature drowsed, while the hearts of men and women ached and bled.

The hour passed and then Karl with rapid step walked into Hollywell House, and following the direction of a servant, found Isabel in the drawing-room. A glance told him her decision, for she was in a travelling dress. As he came in she turned from the window to meet him, and at sight of her face he paused, and his mouth grew dry. In all his life he had never seen a face in such despair, yet in expression it was brave, and calm, and strong.

"I wish to ask you something, Karl." Even her voice was under absolute control.

He bowed in silence and stood still, not even seeking her hands; yet he knew that she was won.

"Is this the only way?" she went on. "Tell me the truth upon your honour, on your soul, and by your love for me."

It was well he had not touched her hand, for his own trembled strangely now. He had come hither panting in his impatience, hot with desire, and conscious above all that as the hounds were on his trail there must not be a moment of delay. Yet at her words this was forgotten, and for the moment his own feel-

## The King's Agent

ings fell into the second place. He thought of another, not himself, and the tone in which he answered sounded curiously hollow.

"The only way, Isabel."

"You will wonder why I asked after all the letters I have seen," she said. "It is because since you left me I have been thinking."

She paused, and he waited with tightening lips. Had she outwitted him? Was she possessed of second sight? But a glance at her face reassured him. It bore no sign of anger or distrust—only deep, unutterable sadness.

"I know now that this—this calamity has been to you an opportunity. My lord's distress and danger, the treason of his friend, this letter from the King, all have served your turn. Do not deny it"—as he would have spoken—"I know that what I say is true."

"It is quite true," he said simply.

"And thus," she said in the same dreary tone, "this misery and wickedness have been to you but stepping-stones. Karl, Karl, the mockery of it. Do you not see yourself what a ghastly mockery it is?"

"It is no mockery to me," he said doggedly. "Nor will it be to Marlborough unless I am dismissed by you."

She sighed slowly and heavily.

"I shall not dismiss you. So I suppose we shall be man and wife. But before I stand with you before the altar you shall know all the truth—all."

She drew herself unconsciously erect now, and for all her white despair, looked more queenly than he had ever seen her.

"I loved Hugh Montgomery," she said. "Once he asked me to be his wife, but I did not know myself and I refused him. Had he asked me a second time we

## The King's Agent

should now be betrothed to each other. But he went from me in silence. And now my dear lord is in danger of his life. If he dies the countess will lose her reason, and this house be ruined. You can save them—you alone. For their sake, and my Charley's sake, I will marry you. But you must understand me perfectly. Were not a life so precious as my lord's at stake, I would die rather than touch your hand. But it is his life against my miserable, worthless self, and his life comes first, so—I will be your wife. Yet if I pay for his life with mine, you will pay too with yours. Do you know that? Can you realize what a wife must be who has but one hour ago loved another with all her heart and soul. Who never—never has loved you and never will. I will be faithful. The vows I take, those will I keep. But what can life be worth to any man with such a weight about his neck? Think you well, oh, think you well, before you do this thing!”

Her voice fell lower through sheer exhaustion, for she was deadly tired, and now she sank upon a chair.

Karl drew a long breath. He felt stiff and queer in brain and limb, much as a man falling suddenly from a great height, though no bones are broken, feels jarred all over with the shock. Her words and their full meaning rang changes in his brain. Her voice when she mentioned Hugh was like the cry of a lost soul—the moan of a mother mourning her first-born. He heard nothing else distinctly. That, and all it signified, filled heart and soul. Looking at her as she sat huddled before him, with pale and lifeless face, he thought of the future and of the past. Already she looked ten years older since the day they had first met. Youth and its happiness had gone from her; she was as one widowed, and by him. They would marry, go to Holland, and not return to England for a length of



## The King's Agent

time. William, with grim humour, would, for his sake, play the game. So for many months, even years, perhaps, Isabel would never know how she had been duped. But one day it must come out, and then——

He walked to the window. Isabel at this movement smoothed out her skirts and rose. She had not expected that he would reply. It was not his way, she knew, when his mind was set to waste his breath in words. And his face, through all the whirlwind of emotion passing over him, had only become harder and more sternly set.

"Let us go."

She stood waiting for him, but he did not turn at once. When he did at last, she started.

"Karl, you look like death!"

He shook his head. "I am ready, Isabel; quite ready now."

He held out his hands. She put hers into them frankly, as she had always done. He kissed her on the lips.

"For the first time," he whispered.

She shivered at his touch, but with an effort controlled herself.

"Pray, let me go. I have to say good-bye to Charley. Let me go, Karl, for that."

But he held her fast. A strange intensity was in his face, and his hands were burning.

"In one moment I will let you go."

He kissed her again hungrily, and then held her at arm's length.

"Once on a time, Isabel, you put me to a test."

"Do not talk of that."

"I must, for I have now to put you to a test." And he gave a grim, joyless laugh. "Hugh Montgomery"—he spoke in a cool, steady tone—"is not in

## The King's Agent

Holland, but hastening hither to you on the road from town."

She quivered all over. "You are mocking me," she cried.

"Nay," he replied, "I mock myself."

"I cannot bear this."

"You have not heard it yet."

"I can well guess what is coming."

"Be still. He is on his way to save you from an enemy—myself."

She was silent now, gazing with dilated eyes and parted lips, and he saw her bosom heave. But there was no animation in her face, only dull wonder and surprise.

"Myself," he repeated. "But he comes too late."

The grim smile was still upon his lips. She sighed in her bewilderment.

"What can you mean?"

"I will tell you." He paused a moment, then continued coldly, "I mean that I have no pleasure any longer in a lie."

"Lie! What lie?"

She was rousing now; a faint tinge of colour showed itself upon her face, and her eyes sought his with an intensity of longing which smote him like a blow.

"You have been deceived," he said shortly. "The Earl of Marlborough has left the Tower, released by an order from the King, obtained by Hugh."

She gave a sudden cry, and reeled, and would have fallen, but he caught her in his arms. Once again he pressed his lips upon her face.

"For the last time," he muttered. "Oh, my God, my God!" Then he let her go.

She had recovered herself, and now stood erect.

## The King's Agent

"If this is true, then all that you have said——"

He nodded. "Yes—all."

He expected her to recoil from him with horror, but her eyes filled with tears like a child's.

"Karl—Karl, how could you treat me so?"

There was no anger in her tone, nothing but keen reproach and wonder. He winced, as if she had struck him. But before he could answer, she had thought again of Hugh.

"Oh, the wrong we have done him! I shall never dare look him in the face again."

He smiled his old, sardonic smile.

"You will soon be put to the ordeal. They are before their time. Hark!"

She caught her breath, and went to the open window. Far away from the high road to the south came the sound of galloping hoofs. This was reality indeed. And Karl, watching her, saw her face and bearing change as if by magic. Once again she was the Isabel he knew in all her youth and beauty. Life and colour had returned to her; her eager breath came in deep sighs; her eyes shone softly. She was transformed. All at once she turned and looked at him.

"You must not be found here. You know what Hugh is; there will be violence."

"And if so, what matter? They will be two or three to one, and I shall not"—he shrugged his shoulders—"I shall not make a great resistance. I am too tired."

She looked at him a moment, as if she would read his soul. Then, going to him, she touched his arm.

"You will go at once," she said decidedly.

He shivered and drew away.

"My life," he muttered, "is not now to be valued at a groat."

## The King's Agent

She flushed to the temples, and lightly laid both her hands upon his.

"That room leads to a private sitting-room of mine, in which the window looks upon the stable yard. Your horse is there; I saw it five minutes back. A private road runs to the left and will take you to St. Albans. Once there you will be safe. Go, Karl, go—for my sake—go!"

They looked into each other's eyes, then slowly, tremulously, he took her hands and kissed them both.

"For your sake, Isabel."

And he was gone.

. . . . .  
A group of people was gathered in the drawing-room, or rather two groups. For in a big chair sat Marlborough, Charley upon his knee, the most contented urchin in the land, while at some little distance, a discreet distance, were sitting Hugh and Isabel close together, hand in hand. Between the couples paced Lord Tottenham talking and laughing loudly, and sipping now and then from a huge goblet of old wine.

"Gad's life, Jack," he was saying, "contradict me if ye please, and Hugh there, let him finger his long rapier, but I do declare that our Lady Isabel is right. Karl Brownker had not a notion we would come so soon. It was his heart misgave him. 'Oddsbum, sir, villain as he is, or was, that man when he saw what he had done he felt pity and remorse, and so stopped in his stride, and turned the other way. Gad's my life, Jack, that's the truth, I say. We have never, I will swear it, plumbed him, and never shall."

"I do not argue, Ned," Marlborough replied, stroking Charley's golden curls. "He has escaped, and that suffices. Only I must add that if ever he dares show his face in England there will be one man

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the less in William's household, and one more soul elsewhere."

At these words Isabel glanced up at Hugh. He smiled, and raised her hand to his lips.

"My dearest," he whispered under cover of some laughing words from Lord Tottenham to Charley, "be under no anxiety. If he is ever at a risk, trust me to save him from it, and this not for your sake or for his, but for my own. After all, he was my friend."

(1)

THE END



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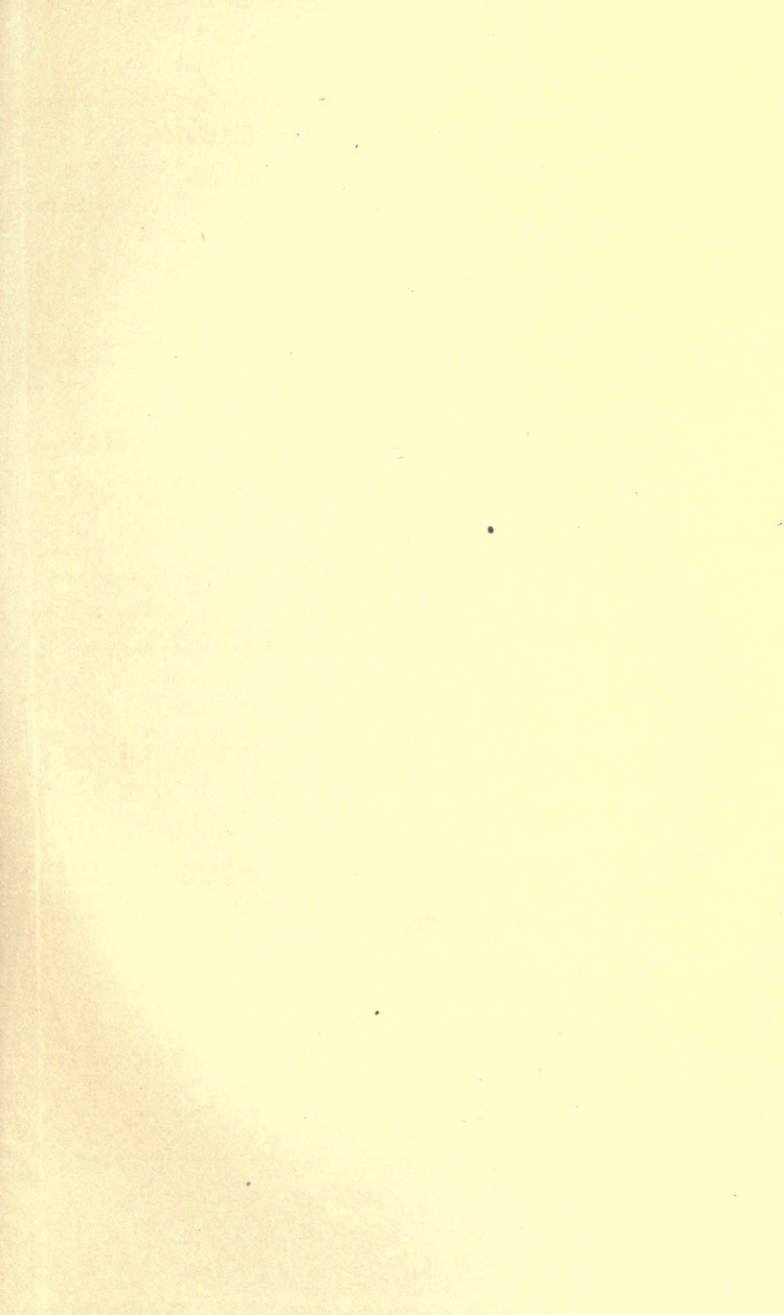
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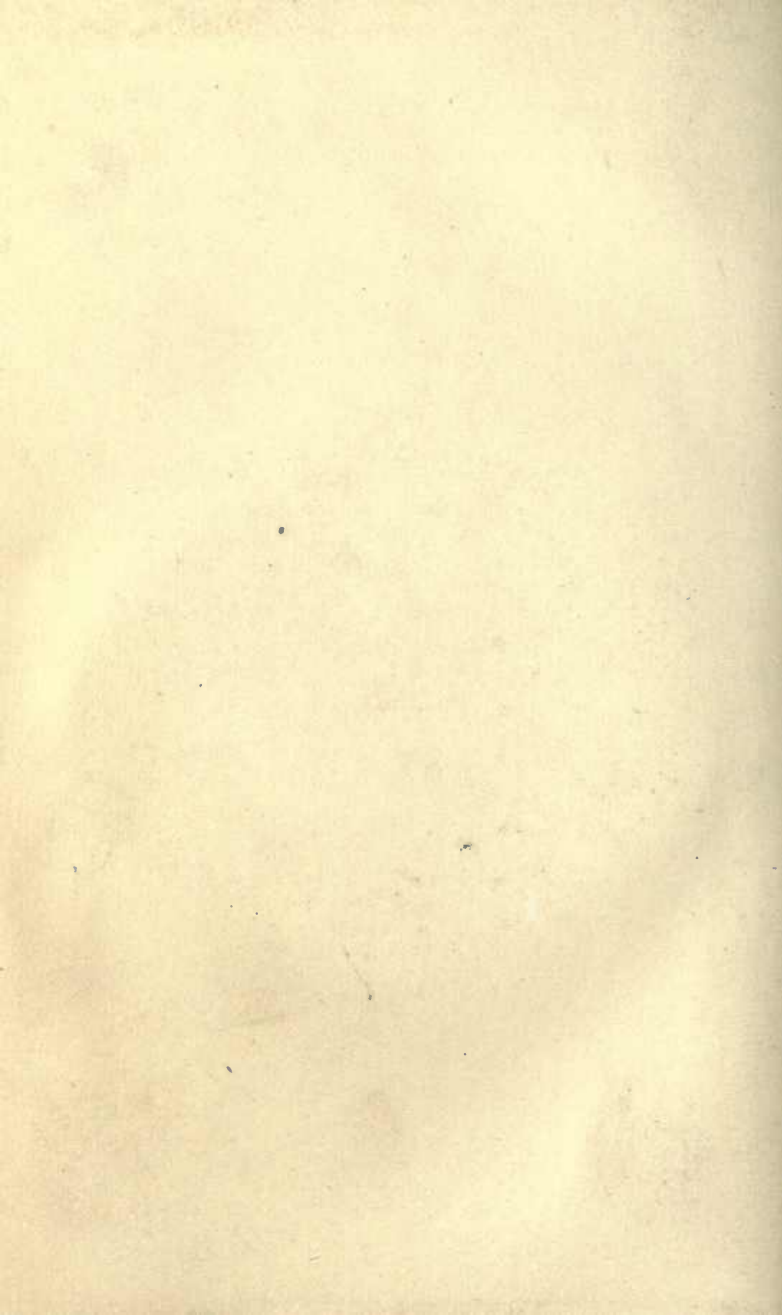
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